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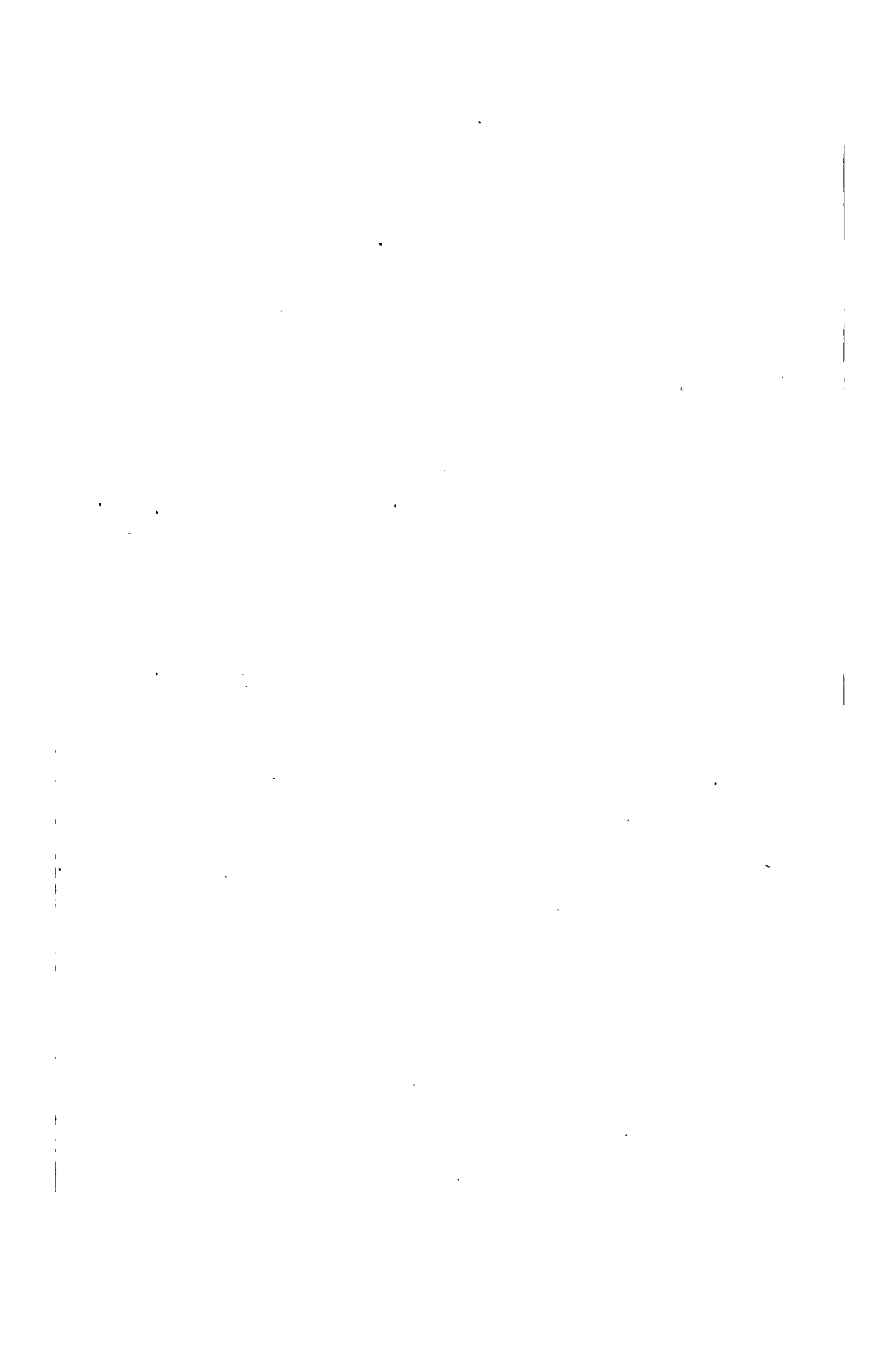
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VOL. III.



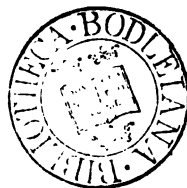
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BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“SON AND HEIR,”

&c. &c.



“Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood.”

In Memoriam.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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RESTORED.

CHAPTER I.

The sacrament of marriage is effectual only where it is spiritual—that is, where there is affinity between the minds and souls of those who are bound by it. The mere fact of a ring on a girl's finger does not change her nature.—ANON.

THE following September Victor returned to Malreward Court. He had business to attend to in connection with the estate, and consultations to be held with Stansfield Erle. Mr. Malreward had written several letters from Homburg, vehemently protesting against the arrangements which his son and son-in-law proposed to make. Victor upon his marriage was to live at Malreward Court, with an allowance sufficient to properly maintain his household and keep up the estate. Deverell was to hold one of the farms rent free for his life, while Mr. Malreward was to receive from the estate £500 a year, and the remainder of the income was to be funded. “Why, we shall never get Mr. Malreward to consent to such terms as these!” said

Victor in amazement; to which Stansfield, who had proposed them, replied with his quiet smile—"I think we shall."

Several documents had been sent to Mr. Malreward to sign, and matters were in abeyance, when one morning towards the end of September Mrs. Stansfield Erle drove in her pony carriage to Malreward Court. Victor came to the door to meet her, and Freddy sprang out with a beaming face.

"Stansfield is off on one of those everlasting expeditions of his down to Cornwall—what he goes for I have no notion, he never tells me anything about his affairs," said Freddy, as they entered the house, "and I thought if you liked I would come and stay with you for two or three days; would you like it, dear boy?"

Victor's smile was answer enough, and without waiting to summon a servant, he ran out and brought from the carriage the little box which Freddy had packed in faith.

"How jolly it is to be here again with you, Victor! just like the happy days last summer twelvemonths, before my accident. Ah! how happy I was!—Well, it is no use to think of that now, for three days I mean to forget everything but the present moment, and you and I will be boy and girl again, without another tie in the world except his Reverence of Tregalva."

Victor wondered to himself; and if Freddy could forget the existence of her husband, he did not find it so easy to put out of his mind all thought of his betrothed.

For three days the brother and sister led a free and happy life, riding and walking together by day, and in the evenings looking over and arranging a chest full of old pamphlets, newspapers, political squibs and private letters—which Victor had lately discovered in the house, and which had belonged to their great-grandfather.

“The Malrewards are not, all of them, so black as they are painted,” said Victor to Freddy. “If there is daring wickedness in our blood, there seems to be, also, daring truthfulness and independence. Our great-grandfather was a violent and extreme man, but he was also a brave and honest one; and think what it was to be, as he was, a lover of free thought and free government in the year 1820! Comfortable Englishmen of the present day—reading their daily papers, and talking what politics they choose at their clubs, in railway carriages, M.P.’s getting uproarious in the House of Commons, journalists making sly hits at Royalty—don’t half appreciate what their fathers and grandfathers did and suffered for them. That is just the way with the Conser-

vatives all the world over—first they kill the prophets, then they build their sepulchres; they resist every reform, yet they enjoy it and benefit by it all the same when it comes in spite of them.”

“I have the idea of a book in my head,” Victor went on, “for which I mean to begin studying when I have left Oxford. The progress of freedom in England during the nineteenth century—freedom political, ecclesiastical, intellectual, social, and so forth. These pamphlets will be of the greatest value for reference, and I shall have to spend months at the British Museum. I wonder whether Helen will take an interest in it,” said Victor meditatively.

“No more than Stansfield would,” was Freddy’s bitter thought. “We must give up all hope of finding the sympathy from our respective better halves, that Victor and I have for each other.”

“Why don’t you write *The Progress of Freedom in Europe?*” asked Freddy. “One outgrows one’s patriotism, so called; one’s belief that England is better than any other country.”

“My time and faculties have *some* limit, thank you,” answered Victor smiling. “But as for patriotism—you should hear Chetwynd and me reviling the British public, which, as he says, has the pretentiousness of the Pharisee and the morals of the Publican and approaches virtue

just near enough to touch the hem of its garment—respectability. I mean to have in my book a chapter upon the improvement in the position of Englishwomen, and how they are awaking to the work which it is possible for them to do in the world.”

“Yes,” replied Freddy, “the world goes wrong from the want of the influence which women could bring to bear upon it, and women go wrong from not being allowed to exercise that influence. It reminds me of the state of things which I saw in London one winter; the West-end was almost impassable with snow, and the East-end was full of men starving for want of work, but—through the muddles of the Marylebone vestry, I believe—the snow which wanted removing and the labourers who wanted employment were never brought together.”

As the brother and sister were thus talking together the last evening of Freddy’s visit to the Court, Jennings entered the library to say that Deverell wanted to speak to Mr. Victor. Victor went out, and presently—for it was a warm, still October evening, and, though a fire blazed in the grate, the window stood wide open—Freddy heard footsteps pacing up and down the gravel path. A fragrant aroma was wafted into the library, even a few words of the two men’s conversation, which bewildered

her, which seemed odd, and unreal, and incomprehensible, like talk heard in dreams.

"So you are to be married on the 25th of this month, dear old fellow?" Victor was saying to his gamekeeper. "Well, life seems clearing up for both of us, does it not? I wonder what has become of the Malreward curse now?"

"Ah! Mr. Victor," came Deverell's voice, in deep bass harmony to Victor's tenor, "you bore your share of that long ago, and have done with it for ever, I hope. I wonder—well, I wonder whether you would think it awfully cheeky of me if I were to ask you to be my best man?"

"Of course I shall be your best man—who has such a right to be as I have?—one's brother, you know"—and then they walked on. Freddy heard no more, and she soon forgot the oddness of this conversation in thinking that this was her last evening at Malreward Court.

She tried to abandon herself to the enjoyment of the present moment—to forget that to-morrow she must return to the dull routine of her home—but she could not do it. Shutting one's eyes to the clouds on a gloomy day will not make the sun shine. Nor could she by any stretch of imagination believe Victor and her self to be boy and girl again. He was altered; he was calmer, graver, less impetuous; his en-

gement to Helen Erle had steadied him already.

Freddy wondered why men were so different. Victor treated her as he would have done one of his fellow-undergraduates, only with much more respect, as a friend, a companion, an equal—one who was perfectly capable of thinking for herself, and taking care of herself, for whose sympathy he was always eager, and whose advice he was often glad to ask for, and to follow. Stansfield treated her as a creature of an altogether different and inferior order of being—a creature at the same time very dear and precious, who required a great deal of guarding and cherishing, whom he loved to pet and talk nonsense to, but with whom he never dreamt of exchanging an idea. No doubt the difference in the two men might partially be accounted for by the difference in their training—by the hard discipline of Victor's earlier years; not only his life at Malreward Court had taught him what misery may be inflicted in the name of lawful authority, but Arthur Byrne had very soon knocked all the self-conceit out of him, and belief that the mere fact of his birth constituted him the superior of any other human being. Whilst Stansfield had been looked up to and leaned upon by his mother and sisters, and brought up to believe that his own wishes,

opinions, interests, were infinitely of more importance than those of any other member of his family.

Freddy could not but feel that she was deservedly punished. She had followed mere unreasoning passion in marrying Stansfield Erle, not those higher instincts which, during the days of her engagement, had warned her again and again of her folly. And now, as a wife, she received plenty of love, plenty of petting and "cherishing," but no real sympathy, consideration, or respect.

When, half an hour afterwards, Victor re-entered the room, he found Freddy sitting by the fire, her head bent down, her face resting on her hand, her eyes gazing into the fire. Struck by her look, he asked, "What is the matter, dear?"

She tried to smile. "Do you remember the time when Mr. Malreward let you go down to Tregalva for a few weeks, and how you dreaded having to return? Well, Malreward Court is as dear to me now as Tregalva was to you, and I have to go home to-morrow—that is all."

Victor started. "Freddy, you don't mean—you cannot possibly mean that you are not happy?"

"I told you when I was first engaged that I believed I had done with happiness for ever.

Well, you need not be surprised that my words have come true."

Victor came to his sister's side; the radiant face with which he had entered the room changed to one of pale dismay. "I had never dreamt of this," and his voice almost choked. "Tell me honestly, is Stansfield unkind to you? He will have to reckon with me if he is."

"No, indeed, Victor, don't run away with that idea; he has never spoken an unkind word to me, I have never seen him out of temper even, since we have been married. There is a legend I have read somewhere," Freddy went on with a quiet bitterness, which contrasted strangely with the agitation she had aroused in her brother, "about a man who fell in love with a bird, and by a spell he turned the bird into a girl; but the bird's wings he kept somehow, and hid away in his house. And the girl married him, and lived happily and contentedly enough, until one day she found her wings again, which her husband had concealed; and then she remembered her bird-life and her bird-instincts, and a loving, submissive caged creature she could never be again. I forget how the story ended—she pined away and died, I think," and Freddy looked up into her brother's face with a smile which distressed him beyond measure.

"For Heaven's sake, Freddy, do keep to the point, and talk sober sense. I am the last man to wish to interfere between husband and wife, but as your brother I have a right to know the truth. You say he is not unkind to you, so what is it that makes you unhappy?"

"I have found my wings again, that is all. It was when I went to Oxford, and met you and Uncle Arthur, and one or two other clever, cultivated people, with whom I could exchange ideas. Oh! Victor, it is a dreadful thing to seem to complain of one's husband," she went on, quite earnestly now, for Victor, in his anxiety to know the truth, had begun to look thoroughly angry, "but indeed I feel as if I should go mad if I did not talk to some one; and there is no one in the world I can talk to as I can to you. You and I are very much alike, and I wonder how you would endure the life which I am condemned to lead day after day. This is what it is. All breakfast time Stansfield reads the *Times* to himself; at half-past nine he goes to his office, for the whole day, taking the *Times* with him—he hates to see women reading newspapers, he says. Well, when he is gone, what is there for me to do? If we were poor, I should take to housekeeping as my business in life, liking it as much as you, Victor, would like keeping a shop. Still, I

should do it. As it is, Stansfield has a wonderful cook, who has lived with him the last ten years, and do you think she would let me walk into her kitchen? She looks daggers at me during the five minutes it takes me to order dinner, I know that. Well, then, there is nothing more to be done in the domestic line until lunch time. After that I have nearly every day to make calls. Stansfield wishes me to keep up a large visiting list, not only for the benefit of his profession, but he considers it good for me to mix more in the society of ladies with domestic tastes than I did before I was married. Now you know what the society of a country town is—old maids, curates, croquet-playing young ladies, the most insufferable twaddling, tiresome set of goodies and busy-bodies. At six o'clock Stansfield comes home to dinner, and repeats to me little bits of local gossip that I have heard twenty times already that day in the course of my visits. He says after a hard day's work he likes to be amused, and not to discuss abstruse subjects with his wife. After dinner, whilst I make a pretence of doing fancy-work—he likes to see a woman working, he says—he invariably goes to sleep for the rest of the evening. Now, there's a life for an immortal being, as tracts say. Talk of the loneliness of single women indeed! No

other woman can be as lonely as a wife may be."

Victor stood leaning against the mantelpiece, his eyes cast down. He was grieved and shocked, and, man-like, half-indignant with the woman who did not find full satisfaction in married life; and yet all the time he understood his sister too well not to feel it perfectly natural, and only to be expected, that Freddy was not altogether contented. "But surely," he said at last, "it is not always like that. You must have some aims, some interests in your life?"

"Really I don't know what they are. There is no one in Donnistone that I care for; no one with whom I have a single idea in common. Stansfield will not let me have any of my old friends to stay with me; he says we are all in all to each other, and don't want other people in the house. And he has positively forbidden me to take long country walks by myself, which you know used to be my delight; they offend his notions of propriety. I read a great deal; but you, with all your Oxford friends, cannot imagine how dreary it is to go on reading book after book, when there is not a single person in the place who knows or cares anything about them. Victor, I am downright starving for want of sympathy and congenial society!"

Again Victor was silent—his instinctive loyalty to his sex, his exalted ideas about the

dignity of the married state, which he held more strongly than ever, now that he was engaged himself—made him feel that he must not encourage Freddy in her discontent, or appear to take her part against her husband, who, so far from being a brutal one, as their father had been, was not even an unkind or a neglectful one, as the world counts unkindness and neglect. He loved Freddy too much not to be deeply distressed and disappointed that her marriage had not brought her all the happiness which he hoped for in his own future life; yet he felt that all that he could do for her was to give her cheap advice—to “make the best of it.” “Surely you and Stansfield have not lost all love for each other already?”

“Of course we love each other still; but don't you see how much harder in some ways that makes one's life? To care for him, to know that he cares for me, and yet to feel all the time there is a great gulf fixed between us—that what he loves is not my best, my true self. He thinks that because I am a woman I must be all heart, all devotion and gushing affection; he forgets that I have a mind and a soul, and that they are literally dying of hunger.”

“It is very strange,” said Victor musingly; “and Stansfield is such a first-rate fellow, too. If he never talks to you about his business affairs,

you can hardly appreciate, as I do, his fine sense of honour about the very smallest matters connected with his profession. He seems to live to show that a lawyer may be as chivalrous as a soldier. It would be strange if he showed you less consideration than he does his clients."

"Ah, don't you see, in his profession he deals with other men's property; in his home he deals with his own—that is, his wife. If only he would confide in me, treat me as a rational being worthy of being his friend, there is nothing I would not do for him!" And there was a look in Freddy's face which told Victor, that if she were miserable with Stansfield she loved him still.

"Well, Freddy, if you still love each other, you will be sure to grow more and more sympathetic with each other; and as time goes on you will become used to your life, and be very happy, I am sure."

"Yes—if I sink my personal identity in his, which for his own sake, as well as mine, I hope I never shall do. When two people marry, it was surely never intended by Providence that one should be the feeble repetition of the other. I am Stansfield's wife, Victor, and therefore, as you and I believe, his equal in the sight of God, his companion and not his chattel. Don't you know what the negroes were supposed to

say—"Am I to be a slave because I happen to have a dark skin instead of a white one?" So I say, am I to be the mere property of another human being because I happen to have a smooth face instead of a hairy one?"

"However," Freddy went on, for she was beginning to feel forlornly conscious that no man—not even Victor—could thoroughly sympathise with her, and that it is useless for a member of a non-privileged class to complain to a member of another class which is by society ranked above it; "however, let us talk of something else. Have you heard from Helen to-day?"

"Yes." Then Victor added, in a troubled tone—"I hope my wife will never have cause to complain of me."

"Is that meant as a reproof to me?" asked Freddy, sadly smiling.

"No, dear—a warning to myself."

"Dear boy," and Freddy took his hand in hers; "if you are as good to your wife as you are to your sister, she will do very well."

The relationship of brother and sister is surely the most ideally beautiful of human life. A man and a woman—so that each gives to the other that sense of mystery and subtle distinction which is always attractive, but whose love, however intense, is not passionate, and there-

fore not subject to vicissitude—between whom there is no thought of authority or of subordination, but each is free, equal, and, from kindred blood, sympathetic—"Thank God!" thought Freddy, "we shall be all brothers and sisters in Heaven!"

That night Freddy started, wide awake, from her first sleep, with the sensation that something heavy had fallen in her room. She sat up in bed, listened, but all was quiet with the silence of midnight. "I must have dreamt it, I suppose," and she tried to compose herself to sleep again. But for an hour or two she lay awake and restless, her nerves a little startled and excited.

Just as she was falling asleep again, a light seemed to flash in her eyes. Again she sprang up, her heart beating fast with an uncomfortable feeling that she was not alone. Over the door of the room were two panes of glass, and through these flickered, passed away, came again, and finally disappeared, a gleam of light, as though some one were going along the passage with a candle in hand. "One of the servants, I suppose," thought Freddy. "But it is very odd, for their rooms are all away in another part of the house." At that moment she heard Malreward church clock toll the hour of two. Immediately afterwards came stealthy foot-

steps outside her door, the light again flashed into her room, then faded away.

"There are burglars in the house!" came the sudden conviction to Freddy's mind. "I must alarm Victor." Always fearless of physical danger, and rather relishing the excitement, she sprang up, and without waiting to strike a light, she threw on her dressing-gown, thrust her bare feet into slippers, opened the door noiselessly, and looked out into the passage. This was one of the many corridors which ran through the house; on each side of it were doors leading into bedrooms, mostly disused and unfurnished. A red baize swing door shut off this corridor from the oak staircase; but between the door of Freddy's room and the red-baize door, was a narrow, corkscrew staircase, leading down to regions unknown to her; and this must be passed before she could get to the chief staircase of the house, and to Victor's bedroom. Freddy's heart almost failed her as she meditated this launch into the darkness. She paused one moment, shivering at the threshold of her door, then she sprang out into the corridor, dashed past the corkscrew staircase, without daring to look down it—she fancied a light glimmered from below—through the red baize door, up a flight of the great oak stairs, down another passage; in a moment more she

was knocking at the door of her brother's room.

"Victor! Victor! wake up, I must come in!" and she turned the handle of the door, but the lock was fast.

A startled, sleepy voice answered her. "What on earth is that? What is the matter? Oh! is it you, Freddy? Come in."

"I can't—the door is locked. Get up and open it. Please be quick!" Poor Freddy's courage was oozing fast away, the situation was getting dreadful—a locked door in front of her, where she had hoped for the comfort and security of Victor's presence, and behind her—no one could tell what—something stealthily creeping along the darkness.

"The door locked! How in the world is that?" And the next moment Victor was shaking and rattling the door from his side of the barrier. "Why, good Heavens!" came then his astounded cry, "it is locked on the outside, and the key is gone!"

Freddy fairly shrieked then; she fancied she felt some one's breath upon her cheek. "Oh! Victor, for mercy's sake let me in!—let me in! there is something coming after me!"

"Stand out of the way a moment," he called to her through the door—"I will soon see the meaning of this. Stand back, Freddy."

In another minute the door was quivering and crashing under the poker which he brought to bear upon it with all his force. Very soon the door was burst open, and she was clinging to Victor's arm. She could hardly speak at first—she could only gasp in answer to his puzzled inquiries, "There are people about—house-breakers—I am sure of it. I saw a light, and there were footsteps——"

"Come into my room, and let me strike a light. Poor Freddy! how you are shaking! It is an awfully queer thing how my door came to get locked."

Soon the welcome light was shining upon Freddy's white face, and Victor's somewhat pale and disturbed one. He took a loaded revolver from a cupboard. "Stay here, Freddy, whilst I take a look round the house; I shall not be gone long."

"Stay here by myself! No, thank you. Where thou goest, I will go," and in the light and Victor's company Freddy's spirit soon revived. "With the poker in one hand and a candle in the other, I shall fear neither man nor ghost."

So the brother and sister, in dressing-gowns and slippers, well armed and lighted, promenaded the house, up and down staircases and corridors. All was dark and silent, all

seemed secure. "Really, Freddy, you must have dreamt it," said Victor, at last. "It's awfully cold, don't you think so?"

"I am certain I did not dream it, Victor, and if I were you I should call up old Jennings."

"Very well, only the process of wakening him will take exactly half an hour, and when he is awake he is no better than an owl. However I am resigned."

They were walking towards the servants' bed-rooms, which lay at the back of the house, when Victor's glance fell upon an empty envelope, lying on the floor. The name was familiar, the handwriting was familiar, and his quick eyes caught the date of the post-mark. A wild dreadful suspicion—no, a certainty—made his heart stop beating for a second. He stooped, snatched up the envelope, and thrust it in the pocket of his dressing-gown.

"What is that?" asked unconscious Freddy.

"Oh, nothing—a bit of paper—it looked untidy lying there, don't you see?" he answered, confusedly. Then he stood still. "I really think it is of no use our looking any further; you had better go back to your room and go to bed, you will be so tired to-morrow if you don't. I will establish myself with a blanket or two in the corridor outside your room, for the remainder of the night; and if you feel at all nervous, or hear any

more odd noises, call me and I will get up. Come along," and he took his sister by the arm, and would hardly listen to her repeated declarations that she was positive she had seen a light and heard footsteps, nor to her expostulations at his proposal of passing the night in such an uncomfortable fashion.

When Freddy was safe in her room again, Victor, by the light of the candle which he held in his trembling hand, closely examined the envelope which he had picked up. It was addressed, in his own handwriting, to Henry Malreward, Esq., Post Restante, Homburg. The date of the Homburg post mark was just a week old. How could that envelope have come here, if his father had not himself brought it? Mr. Malreward had returned to England; he was in the house now, at this actual minute; he was no doubt in the habit of coming home secretly; his were the footsteps which Freddy had heard. And the vision of his father which Victor had seen at Oxford, was not a vision, but a reality.

When morning came, and daylight and breakfast time, Freddy was inclined to laugh at her past terrors, but Victor did not seem inclined to talk about them at all. He smiled uncomfortably, and tried to change the subject.

"My dear fellow, you are quite incoherent,

do you know. You had not the slightest idea of what I was saying to you."

"Had I not? I beg your pardon, I am rather stupid this morning, I think. What time did you say you must go home to-day? Very well, I will drive you to Donnistone. And Stansfield, you say, returns to-night? I want to see him as soon as possible."

It was an intense relief to Victor when he had got his sister safe out of Malreward Court, and had left her at her own door. Immediately he returned home he summoned Jennings, and went straight to the point by demanding of him when he had last seen Mr. Malreward, and who had dared to lock his—Victor's—door last night.

The old man became dense and stolid as a stone wall. He had never seen his master since he had left Malreward Court, nigh upon three years ago; he had never had a line from him, and did not know where he was; in foreign parts somewhere, he believed. He was beginning to take God to witness to his truth, to utter all the blasphemies with which liars prop up their lies, when Victor sternly ordered him to hold his tongue.

The young Squire fared no better with Mrs. Jennings. The housekeeper looked extremely scared, but she vowed and protested, with many

tears, that she and her husband were as ignorant of all Mr. Malreward's proceedings, and of Mr. Victor's door being locked last night, as babies. Baffled, by no means satisfied, Victor examined every room in the Court, but found no further evidence that his father had returned home.

"I am sick to death of the place," grumbled Victor to himself. "If he wishes to come back to the Court, let him do so openly. I will not bring Helen here for a single day unless I can have a clear understanding with Mr. Malreward that I am to be master of the place. I would rather live in the poorest cottage on the estate than be constantly worried here by his turning up unexpectedly. I shall ask Stansfield, as soon as he comes home, to give me house-room until I go up to Oxford."

As Victor was sauntering disconsolately through the park, trying to console himself with a cigar, he heard a gun fired, and then two men's voices in angry conversation. He walked towards the sound, and came upon this scene:

A meadow with cows grazing in it, and with a footpath running across it, skirted by woods gorgeously varied with gold, scarlet, green, and ruddy brown, shimmering in soft autumnal sunshine. Lounging with his back against a

wooden stile, was an under-keeper, a sullen, insolent-looking young man in brown velveteen, with a gun under his arm. Opposite to him stood a tall, elderly man, in a rough tweed suit and leathern gaiters—a man with grizzled hair and a refined and pleasant face, which now looked flushed and grieved and indignant. Between the two men lay the dead body of a thoroughbred and very handsome brown and white spaniel. To them entered the tall lissom young Squire, in fluffy grey, as usual; and taking his cigar from his lips, he inquired of the elder man, whom he knew to be a farmer on a neighbouring estate, and Deverell's future father-in-law—"What is the matter, Mr. Alresford?"

"The matter is, sir," answered the farmer stiffly, "that your keeper has shot my dog."

Victor reddened with keen annoyance, and flung his cigar away. "This is a bad business, Hoskins," and he turned sharply on the keeper. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"He wor after the game, and I shot him, as I shall shoot every dog as I catches in the covers."

"It is quite true, Mr. Malreward," said Alresford, who was a particularly just and reasonable man, "that my dog had a minute before jumped over that stile into the wood; but I was calling

him back, and he was running towards me when the keeper shot him."

"I shall tell Deverell to pay him what wages are owing to him, and discharge him at once."

"Oh, will yer?" said Hoskins, with a grin—he had evidently had more beer than was good for him—"you're not my master, as long as old Squire's alive. I didn't come to please you, and I ain't a-going to please you."

For one moment Alresford thought Victor was going to strike the keeper, and he had half put out his hand to hold him back; for, armed and somewhat tipsy as Hoskins was, he really feared that murder might be done. But the young Squire pulled himself up as with a strong hand, and said, quite coolly and steadily, "You will at once go to the lodge and give up your gun, and if I see you anywhere about the covers after to-day, I shall summons you for trespassing."

Hoskins walked off muttering and swearing, and Victor turned to the farmer and said—"I am very sorry about your dog, Mr. Alresford—such a beautiful fellow as he is, too. I know how much I should feel it if he were mine," and Victor went down on one knee, and held up the dog's lifeless head, and looked sadly at it. "There is no really replacing a friend like this, but you will let me try and get another dog for

you, as much like him as possible—will you not?" he said, with his pleading, boyish look; and the farmer declared afterwards that there were tears in the young Squire's eyes.

"I will carry him home for you, Mr. Alresford; you will like to have him buried properly." Victor would take no refusal. Carrying in his arms the poor dog, whose life had been harmless, but whose death was to have disastrous consequences, he walked beside Mr. Alresford to his farmhouse, which he entered for a few minutes.

Victor ventured to glance a little curiously at the eldest daughter, Lucy, who was to be Deverell's wife, and, though she and the world little guessed it, the young Squire's sister-in-law. So far as he had heard and seen, she was just the woman suited for Deverell—gentle, refined in look and manner, calm-tempered, strong-charactered, with plenty of tact, common sense, and intelligence.

"As kind-hearted a young fellow as ever lived," said Mr. Alresford to his wife and daughter when Victor had gone away; "with a fiery hot temper, no doubt, but a good notion how to keep it well in hand, nevertheless."

CHAPTER II.

It is a father's throat
 Which I will shake, and say, I ask not gold,
 I ask not happy years ; nor memories
 Of tranquil childhood, nor home-sheltered love,
 Though all these hast thou torn from me, and more,
 But only my fair fame, only one hoard
 Of peace, which I thought hidden from thy hate.

SHELLEY.

IT was the brief golden twilight of that October evening when Victor went through the park, with the intention of finding Deverell. Presently a double report from a distant cover told him of the head-keeper's whereabouts, and he vaulted over a stile and plunged into the woods. He walked along the rides with heavy, listless steps ; an undefined foreboding weighed him down, a dark shadow followed him—all his happiness, all his future hopes, which yesterday had appeared so splendid and so stable, seemed to be resting upon insecure foundations. There was something peculiarly dreadful in these vague but significant hints that Mr. Malreward was not far off. It was useless to remind himself that he was of age, that his father had no longer

legal power over him ; the mere fact of Mr. Malreward's secret return to England boded his son no good. He must have strong reasons for secrecy, or why should not the Squire show himself openly in his own house ?

The dusk was deepening fast, the fallen leaves rustled softly, a pale light lingered in the sky, a moist fragrance in the air ; there was sometimes a pattering amongst the bracken and under-wood, as some little inhabitant of the woods, startled by Victor's presence, scampered away, and in his present state of excited, apprehensive nerves, startling him still more.

Presently it seemed to him as though the muffled sound of dead leaves beneath his feet was echoed softly, step by step. He came out upon a spot where four paths crossed each other, and then and there he met his doom.

Victor recognised his father instantly, as he had done at Oxford—this grey, haggard, shrunk-en old man who stood before him. The reality of their meeting, now it had come, seemed infinitely worse than he had imagined it would be. So long as he did not actually see Mr. Malreward, he could flatter himself that he was mistaken, and that his father was not in England. He stood quite still, he felt as though he were turning into stone.

But though the son had only bitterness, repug-

nance for his father, and that strange, almost superstitious terror of him, which had lasted on into Victor's manhood, Mr. Malreward looked at the young man with an odd, startled, pride and admiration. "Halloa, Victor, my boy, here you are then! Why, by Jove! what a tall, whiskered, manly-looking fellow you have grown since I saw you last! Well, this is quite an unexpected pleasure for both of us, isn't it? I knew you were at home, but I did not mean to let you know that I was, until to-morrow. I was looking about for that other dear dutiful son of mine, Mark Deverell."

Victor remained silent, till, at last, finding all his affection thrown away, Mr. Malreward said, irritably, "Haven't you got a word to say to your father, you sulky young dog?"

"Well, of course, sir, I am very much surprised to see you here," began Victor, trying to recover his self-possession, and to speak in a steady, courteous tone. "I am not going to dispute your right to come home in any way you please, or ask you why you keep it secret."

"I should think not, indeed. I have a right to return to England incog. if I choose, and it is not the first time I have done it either. I was in London last season, and ran down to Oxford for a couple of days, just to look you up, my boy. I found out where your rooms are, and

heard a good deal about you. 'Pon my soul, to think that a son of mine should turn out such a paragon! But I could never manage to catch you alone. I had to be a little cautious, for reasons of my own."

"Well, sir, you can have the Court to yourself as soon as you please. I shall leave your house and go to Stansfield Erle's."

"No, you will *not*!" cried Mr. Malreward, with an oath, his half-jocular tone suddenly changing into one of ferocity. "Do you think I will have you go and tell Stansfield Erle, of all men in the world, that I am here—a swindling, meddling lawyer!" And the Squire poured forth an incoherent medley of curses and complaints. "He has got me regularly under his thumb; he screwed a power of attorney out of me three years ago; he has the whole place in his hands till after you come of age, and the estate is resettled. He has turned me out of my home, and robbed me of the society of my children, and made me a wanderer on the face of the earth—there is not a thing he has left me that I can call my own. God help me!" cried the poor old man, with an unconsciously ludicrous pathos—"God help me! I cannot even draw a cheque!"

"This is rather extraordinary behaviour on Stansfield's part," said Victor, an unpleasant suspicion—but not of the honourable lawyer—

forcing itself into his mind. "He must have strong reasons for what he has done. Unless you can tell me what those reasons are, I shall feel it my duty, as he is the family lawyer and agent for the estate, to let him know that you are here."

Mr. Malreward swore considerably at his son, but Victor stood firm. "There has been foul play somewhere," he thought, "and I will thoroughly sift this matter." At last, finding he had not now the boy to deal with whom he had left three years ago, the Squire calmed down and said, in the languid drawl which seemed most natural to him, "Well, you see, in an unguarded moment, I rather put myself into Stansfield Erle's power. The fact is, being awfully hard up for a little cash, and with the most honourable intentions of repaying the loan at the first opportunity, I made use of his name—when perhaps it would have been wiser not to have done so."

"Where and how did you use his name?"

"Well, if you are so preciously particular," said Mr. Malreward with a simper, "you must know it was on a cheque."

"You mean to say that you forged Stansfield's signature?" asked Victor, with a dreadful calmness.

"My dear fellow, pray do not express your-

self so coarsely, it is not like a gentleman to do so. The unfortunate part of the little affair was, that though I thought I had managed it all so neatly, he somehow got hold of that deuced cheque, and has got it still, in a fire-proof safe in his strong room, no doubt. And so you see, he has been able to make things rather uncomfortable for me; just to please him, I had to tear myself away from my beloved home and go and live abroad; and I don't find the wines and dishes agree with me; and I am breaking fast, I know I am," he sighed plaintively—"with pining for my native air. So, you see, I just ran down to Malreward Court to have a little private conversation with you, before I sign those precious documents which my dear son-in-law has been kind enough to draw up. I am not going to make over the bulk of my property to you and Mark Deverell in my lifetime, so you need not think it."

Here Victor burst out—"Do you think I want your money or your estate, or anything, but to get free from you and lead a decent, quiet life? Good God! what a man you are—what a father you have been to me! You are not content with having been the curse of my boyhood, forcing me to live here against my will, a place that was a very hell on earth, but you come to me now with such a confession as this! Am I

never to have peace from you? are you to go on living year after year, disgracing everyone belonging to you—dragging my name as well as your own through the mire? What am I to do? A forger's son! Good God, only to think of it! And I was so proud and happy yesterday," he muttered with almost a sob; the contrast of his bright, innocent young triumphs smiting him; and being young, he could feel pity for himself alone, just then. "I am not fit to be an honest woman's husband."

The last words, low spoken as they were, did not escape Mr. Malreward, and he asked with a leer—"And who is the honest woman, pray?—or is it that you are going to make her an honest woman? I did not quite catch your meaning, you see."

"If you say that again, I will kill you," replied Victor, in a tone quite quiet with intense passion.

Mr. Malreward laughed a little uneasily. In some respects, the former relations between the father and son were reversed, and in the twilight the young man looked tall and strong enough, to make the arousing of his wrath appear a more dangerous game than it used to be. "What a regular young devil it is! I can quite believe you want to murder me, my son."

"You act as though you want to drive me to

it! There will never be any peace for me as long as you are alive."

"Come, come, enough of this," answered the Squire sternly. "I did not come here to be treated to your moralizings, keep them for your college friends, who, I daresay, will quite appreciate them, and let us stick to business. Now, I know very well who this sweetheart of yours is, and I'll just tell you what I have made up my mind to do. If you don't yield to me in the matter of the re-settlement of the estate, as soon as ever I get safe back to the Continent I'll blow up the whole concern. I'll write to this young woman, and give her a full true and particular account of how, in such a rash moment, I used her brother's name, and how he promised, on conditions, not to prosecute me, and refer her to Stansfield himself, if she wants confirmation of my statement; and do you think she will marry you then, my boy?"

Victor stood aghast and dumb—more at the malignant wickedness of the man than from fear that he would have power to loosen the bond between himself and Helen. A horror chilled him, as if his father were a mocking, jeering fiend, who had come to take away his soul, and meant to get it somehow. Here in the darkness and loneliness of the woods, without another human being within earshot, he felt

that something very dreadful might happen if he did not take good heed to himself. Bewildered by passion, his first instinct was to get away in safety. "I dare not stay with him—I cannot answer for myself what I may be driven to do.—I have nothing more to say to you, Mr. Malreward. I shall just tell Stansfield you are here, and leave you two to fight it out," and with that Victor walked off.

He did not walk far, however, before his whole strength seemed to give way, and, giddy, staggering, he supported himself against a tree. There he remained for several minutes, sighing bitterly from time to time, and feeling as though the reflected disgrace which had suddenly fallen upon him was more than he could bear.

Presently footsteps again came stealthily crushing down the leaves, and Mr. Malreward overtook his son. The father felt that he had gone a little too far, and had indulged too freely in the enjoyment he had always felt in irritating Victor. After coming all the way from Homburg to get into his power, the sensitive, impulsive boy, just as he himself was in the power of the cool, resolute man of business, Stansfield Erle, he was not going to let him slip through his fingers like this. "Come, Victor, my boy," he said, in a would-be conciliatory tone, "you are too hasty-tempered,

and so am I. If I have spoken disrespectfully of your young lady, I beg your pardon."

"For God's sake, let me alone!" said Victor, in a voice of agony. "Do you want to madden me quite?"

"This is what I want," returned Mr. Malreward, determined this time to keep to the point. "I want to have more of my own money than the paltry £500 a year which that stingy beggar Stansfield Erle allows me."

"I tell you I'll have nothing more to do with you. Stansfield shall settle with you to-morrow."

"Yes; and then don't you see what a pleasant position you and your sister will be in. Stansfield swore he would prosecute me if ever I set foot in England again; and he is such a devil for keeping his word, that he will do it if he catches me here, though he has married my daughter, more fool he. And as for having nothing more to do with me, my dear fellow, that is more easily said than done. You cannot alter the facts of nature, and the laws of society. So long as I am your father, and you are my son, you can never altogether escape from me. Whatever I do, or have done to me, you will have to bear your share of it. Whether I am dead or alive, in the country or out of it, you cannot get out of being, or having been, Henry Malreward's child. If I am transported for for-

gery, you'll be a felon's son ; if you murder me, as you looked rather like doing a minute ago, you'll be hanged as a felon yourself."

Victor felt, as Mr. Malreward intended him to feel—as though he were bound hand and foot, and delivered over to his father to be his prey. He sighed again, and looked round him forlornly in the darkness. "Well, sir, what is it that you want to do?"

"I want to come back to Malreward Court; but I fear there is not much chance of my doing that, as long as my beloved son-in-law is alive. However, I should be contented to live abroad if I had more money, and that you must give me. I appeal to your sense of honour and justice if it is fair that I should be allowed to spend only about one-sixth part of my real income?"

"You have forfeited all claim to a single penny of it, as you know very well. However, if you will pledge me your word of honour (and I doubt if that will bind you," thought Victor, bitterly,) "that you will at once return to the Continent, and never attempt to come to England again, or to molest me in any way, I will promise you that your income shall be increased to £800 a year."

Of course Mr. Malreward was not satisfied, but Victor remained firm. "If you will not be

contented with what I have offered you, I will leave Stansfield to deal with you."

In the end this arrangement was made. Mr. Malreward was to go up to London that night, to cross the Channel the following day, and to write to Victor as soon as he had arrived in Paris. Victor was to solemnly pledge himself to reveal to no one the fact of his father's secret visit to the Court; and in return for Mr. Malreward's signing certain documents, was to sign another, by which he bound himself to allow Mr. Malreward £800 a year for the rest of his life. "We had better part here," said Victor. "If you come to the Court again this evening, it will not be necessary that we should meet. I will remain in my own room."

Mr. Malreward could not resist a grim chuckle—"You little thought I was so near you last night, did you, my boy? The Jennings' are good, trustworthy old souls, and keep my counsels well. I wanted to take a look round the house undisturbed, and I took the liberty of turning the key upon you for a few hours; it is not the first time I have done it, either—ha! ha!"

"It will be the last time, then," and Victor walked off. Some undefinable impulse made him turn his head when he had gone a few yards. Mr. Malreward was standing still, looking after

him. It was too dark now to see the expression of his face ; but something in his attitude suggested to Victor—he knew not why—that his father was feeling a sort of regret and longing after something which he had lost. “Good-bye, sir,” said Victor.

“It is good-bye, for ever and ever,” said the old man in a husky, trembling voice. “Good-bye, Victor, good-bye !” And then they parted, the son returning straight to the Court, and the father going on into the dark depths of the woods.

The following day Victor began to recover his spirits a little, to hope that Mr. Malreward had crossed, or was crossing the Channel. He calculated how long it would be before he should get a letter from him. “When I know for certain that my father is out of England, I shall begin to breathe once more.” It struck him during the afternoon that he had seen nothing of Deverell for two days—since that evening they had had a cigar together, and had talked about the keeper’s forthcoming wedding-day, and Victor had promised to be his best man. So the young Squire sauntered off to the lodge, as he often did in the evenings. It made him feel a little melancholy to think that he should never do so again, when this week was over. Deverell would go away to his farm,

and he would have a pretty wife, and the world would talk if the young Squire were often to be seen lounging about his tenant's house.

"How little the world knows!" thought Victor, reddening. "If only I could tell everybody that Deverell is my brother!"

Heavy rain had fallen that day, the wind had risen, yellow leaves were torn from the trees, and sent whirling through the air; a solemn murmur was in the waning woods; a wild green sky strewn with flying purple clouds was fading in the south-west; and as Victor neared the lodge, whose latticed windows shone redly through the darkness, he remembered the night, five years ago, when he had first come to Malreward Park, and Deverell had brought him to the lodge to keep him out of his father's way, had told him wild tales about the doom of his house, and how Mr. Malreward had suddenly burst in upon them.

Victor knocked, no one answered; he called Deverell by name, then impatiently he pushed open the door and entered. Deverell was sitting before the fire, in a crouching attitude, his face bent down and buried in his hands. The room was in confusion, all the keeper's wardrobe seemed scattered about; coats, shirts, and books, were piled upon the chairs and tables, and a portmanteau, half-filled, stood open on the floor.

Victor stared—"What on earth are you about, Deverell? Getting ready for your wedding journey already?"

Then Deverell raised his head and looked at Victor. If any thought of a journey were in Deverell's mind, it was surely the journey of Death, no other. Victor stood still and speechless. Once before had he seen Deverell look as he did now—it was after Mr. Malreward had proclaimed him to be his son.

There were a few moments of dead silence; then Victor gasped out—"What is it?—dear fellow, do speak—don't look at me like that! What has happened?"

"I am going away, Mr. Victor," the keeper answered in a dull, hard tone; "I am going to America. I did not want you to know till I was off. If you had not come in to-night, you would never have seen me again, and it would have been best so."

"This is dreadful." Victor dropped into a chair, and sat staring at his brother. Deverell turned round towards the fire again, and put his hand over his face. "But, Deverell—what is the meaning of it—what has happened—Deverell!" And then Victor started up as if he had been shot. "*You have seen Mr. Malreward!*"

"Seen Mr. Malreward!" Deverell slowly re-

peated the words; he raised his head, and looked Victor fixedly in the face. "What do you mean? How can I have seen Mr. Malreward, when he is not in England? At least, I suppose he is not—you told me he was at Homburg when you last heard from him. What do you mean by my seeing Mr. Malreward?"

Victor grew rather confused at this—remembering his promise to keep his father's counsel. "Well, you looked as though you had seen him, you know."

"No, sir," Deverell answered steadily, still gazing into Victor's face. "You are mistaken. The cause of my leaving England is, that I am not fit to be Lucy Alresford's husband. I always knew that I was not; but now—" his hands went up to his face again, and Victor saw how he writhed, as if he were in agony.

A kind of despair came over the younger man. "There is no end to it," thought he. "The mere fact of Mr. Malreward having been in the place for a few hours seems to have brought a blight upon everything, although Deverell does not even know that he has been here. I begin to think that Providence has ordained that there is to be no lasting peace and happiness for any of us in whose veins flow the Malreward blood. But surely," he said aloud, "you are too hasty in throwing everything up.

If, as I understand you, you have had a disagreement with Miss Alresford—I saw her only yesterday, by-the-by—there was nothing wrong then, surely, was there?”

“It is not that, sir—not what you think,” and again on Victor’s face did Deverell fix his eyes. Full of unfathomable misery were they, and what seemed like dread and horror, as if he had seen some ghastly sight which he could not forget. “There is only one thing I am going to ask you to do for me—and please, sir, look upon me as a dying man that asks you—don’t go near the Alresfords again, don’t ask them any questions, don’t say a word about me to any one if you can help it. My God! when I think of what I shall make her suffer!” He paused; a sudden stillness came over him—it was as if his heart had broken, and he had died that very minute.

After a time, when Victor attempted further expostulation, the keeper answered, “It’s no use talking, Mr. Victor, no use at all; I mean to go to America, and there’s an end of it. I tell you, sir, it would have been better if we had never met again, and your last sight of me had been that night we took a turn on the lawn in front of the Court together. You shook hands with me when you bid me good night—do you remember? Ah, well, I am not the same man

now I was then ; there is something between us that can never be got over."

' "Deverell, for heaven's sake speak out plainly—what is it that you have done?" Victor was getting desperate, for that "something between them" of which the keeper spoke seemed like a ghastly, moral barrier, which he could not see, which he could only feel, and which he determined to break down.

"Oh! sir, I can't tell you everything," said Deverell, with a most dreadful smile. "Only that when I thought all the devils were gone out of me, they came back again. I thought I was tamed down—I was going to be a good husband, a decent member of society—such humbug! I know better now. The Malreward blood is too strong for me, and so it will be for you some day, Mr. Victor, mark my words. It's no use fighting against it—might as well go to hell first as last."

Victor shuddered; the remembrance of what he had felt for one minute during the interview with his father only last night, darted through him like a knife going into his heart. "Don't talk like that—you don't know what I have felt before now—like a murderer——"

"Ah! have you? And what does that feel like, now?"

"Deverell, I believe you are mad!" Victor

stared at him with a white, fascinated countenance; while Deverell looked at him in return with a mocking smile, and a faint likeness to his father flickering over his face like a ghastly, phosphorescent gleam.

There was a slight sound outside—it might have been the dead leaves rustling, driven by the wind into the stone porch; it might have been a footstep. “What’s that?” and Deverell sprang to his feet with a muttered oath, and a look of awful terror.

Victor again thought of the night, five years ago, when Mr. Malreward’s stealthy footstep had been heard outside the lodge. Every moment he expected the door to open, and he gazed at it with a face almost as horror-struck as the keeper’s own. He said, under his breath, “It is Mr. Malreward.”

“Oh! God, don’t—don’t say that!” Victor never forgot the low cry which burst from Deverell then. He writhed till he was almost bent double; he grasped Victor’s arm till he bruised it.

The keeper seemed altogether another man, when, a minute afterwards, he drew himself up, and said in almost a calm and natural voice, “Now, Mr. Victor, I have talked enough nonsense. I am sure you must want to have a reason for my going to America. Well, I got

mad drunk yesterday, you must know, and insulted the Alresfords—the whole family—beyond all bearing, and so, you see, there is nothing for me now but to go abroad, for stay in this place another day I will not.”

Victor implored Deverell, in the most moving terms he could think of, to stay, to give himself another chance; even such a fault as this might be atoned for and forgiven. His marriage would have to be put off indefinitely, no doubt, but still he might retrieve his character, and win Lucy over again some day. But the keeper would not listen to him.

“It’s no use, sir, I tell you. If you were to talk till Doomsday, if Lucy herself were here and begged me to marry her all the same, and there was no fear of—no fear but what I might live and die in peace, I would not hearken to her. I am reprobate enough as it is. I would not marry her now—no, no; may God keep me from doing such a thing as that!” And then, saying doggedly, “Excuse me, Mr. Victor, I must go on packing my few things now, or I shall not catch the train as I want to do,” Deverell began busying himself about the books and clothes which strewed the room. “There is only one more thing you can do for me when I am gone,” he said presently, “and that is, take care of poor Nell, will you, Mr. Victor?”

and he looked sadly at the black retriever lying asleep on the hearth-rug.

"Indeed I will, Deverell," answered the young Squire, in a half-choked voice.

Victor stood before the fire, leaning his head against the mantelpiece; he could not speak, it was all that he could do to keep from bursting into tears. He did not know until this shock of their sudden parting came, how much he cared for Deverell. This wild, lawless gamekeeper brother of his, branded from his birth, spotted with desperate sins, was dearer to him than any other man in the world—except the stainless gentleman, Arthur Byrne. It was hard to say why it was so. Only that some words would often come into Victor's mind when he thought of Deverell, "His sins which are many, are forgiven, because he loved much." This capability of intense affection shone, all their lives long, as a bright light amidst much that was gloomy in both these brothers—amidst Victor's faults, amidst Deverell's vices.

And with what joy and pride Victor had watched what he had believed to be Deverell's progress towards reform, steadily going on ever since Victor had come to the Court, and which, with many falls and relapses, had yet been progress—as the tide flows on, though the waves may now and then seem to recede. How he

had looked forward to seeing Deverell a sober, prosperous man, going the rounds of his farm, with a wife and children at home. But the world which scoffs at penitents, and disbelieves in conversions, had been in the right of it after all, and the Malreward devil had only been bound down for a time, and not cast out altogether. That doubt of the power of any human being to resist temptation, if only temptation be persistent enough, that disbelief of the moral advancement of the race, and the final triumph of right, which from time to time haunts us all, and which, to ardent young hearts, is like paralysis, came down upon Victor then, and chilled his very blood. "I must think of Deverell's bodily comfort now, that seems the only thing worth attending to in this world. I was going to give you a wedding present, of course," he said. "I have some of the money for it here." And he took out his pocket-book. "You will let me give it to you all the same, will you not?"

"No, sir, no!" And, with a shudder, Deverell thrust back the two or three bank-notes which Victor tried to put into his hand. "Not for the whole world! I will not, I tell you, Mr. Victor!" he cried, in a sharp tone of pain. "I would cut off my right hand sooner than take a penny from you now! No, if you would only keep it, and give it to Lucy by-and-by. She will marry a

man worthy of her some day, I hope!" And Deverell made a great effort to choke down a sob. "This is the only thing I'll take of yours." With a mournful smile, he brought from a writing-desk a photograph of Victor himself, which had been taken the year after the young heir had come to the Court. It was the portrait of a tall and slender boy, with a most thoughtful face, with curly hair, and peach-down on his upper lip, and sad, sweet, steadfast eyes. "I'll never part with that, till I die!"

Deverell went on packing his portmanteau, whilst Victor watched him as if he were in a dreadful dream, as if something were going to happen that he would give his life to prevent, while yet he was bound hand and foot, and forced to stand helplessly by.

The keeper locked and strapped his portmanteau, and stood up. "Now I am ready, and we must part. I shall write to you from Liverpool," he said, in a steady voice, though his face was like that of a corpse.

"I will walk with you to the station," was Victor's almost inaudible answer.

"Not a step. You shall not run the chance of being seen with me, I am determined of that." Deverell put out his lamp, cast one wild glance around the room, disordered, but cheerful and glowing in the firelight, his home for fifteen

years, dear to him for a hundred associations of pain and pleasure. Then he said, "That is over, then. Come, Mr. Victor." Victor went out mechanically. In another moment they were both standing in the stone porch, with the cold night wind blowing, and rain and withered leaves driving in their faces. The keeper shut and locked the door of the lodge, and put the key into Victor's hand. "That is yours now, sir. And that is your way home, and this is mine, and so—good-bye."

"Deverell! Deverell!" was all Victor could say, holding out both hands to him, with a pathetic, pleading face.

But Deverell recoiled. "No, no—I'll not touch your hand. You don't know—you'll never know; but I'll not do it—no, no! But—oh! if a man like me may dare to say it!—may God love you, and bless you for ever and ever, dear—dear brother! No, forget all that, I am just a keeper you once had here, nothing more—never anything more!" And with that Deverell broke away, and rushed off into the darkness.

CHAPTER III.

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
 Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath;
 The red-ribbed ledges drip with a silent horror of blood,
 And Echo there, whatever is asked her, answers "Death."
 For there in the ghastly pit long since a body was found—
 His who had given me life—O father! O God! was it well?

TENNYSON.

ON the evening of the 9th of October, being the evening before Victor went up to Oxford, he dined at the house of Stansfield Erle. It was a dreary, windy, pouring wet night, but the drawing-room of Arbutus Villa looked all the more bright and cosy for the contrast with the world without. The room was full of nick-nacks and pretty things; the subdued lustre of the moderator lamp, the red glow of the fire—a core of intense molten heat—fell on crimson velvet curtains, white marble statuettes, and carved black wood furniture from Bombay. When Stansfield had taken Arbutus Villa, he had thought nothing good enough for his bride. Freddy stood before the fire, one little foot

resting on the fender, her eyes fixed on the gilt clock on the velvet-covered mantelpiece. How slowly the hands always seemed to move upon that clock! Time loitered and dragged on his way in these, her married days. She was dressed like a matron in black velvet, a sombre background to her golden hair and clear bright eyes and cheeks; but it was with a girl's impetuosity that she sprang forward when the door opened, and Mr. Victor Malreward was announced.

"You delightful boy, to come so early! Stansfield will not be home till seven, and we shall have a good hour's talk alone together."

However, the hour's talk did not prove so delightful as she had expected. Victor seemed depressed and abstracted, making spasmodic efforts to talk, and then relapsing into silence. Freddy, gazing earnestly at her brother, fancied his face looked worn and changed. "Dear old fellow," she said at last, "you are certainly low about something. What is it? Have you and Helen been quarrelling?"

"I think not," and a smile suddenly lighted up Victor's face. Involuntarily he pressed the ring which she had given him—a posy ring, a broad band of dead gold, with this motto engraved inside it in old English letters, "Who shall separate us?"

The fact was, Victor had by no means re-

covered, nor was he likely to do so for some time to come, the shock of Deverell's sudden departure. It had been one of the bitterest griefs of his life. He had received from him that morning a few hurried lines written from Liverpool. "I am just going on board the steamer," were Deverell's words. "By the time you get this I shall have sailed for New York." So now Victor had lost even the faint hope that the keeper might repent his rashness and return.

There was another cause for Victor's looking fretted and anxious. He had not received that other letter for which he was looking out by every post. Not a line had come from Mr. Malreward since they had parted three nights ago in the woods. And Victor was haunted by the terror that at any moment his father might reappear.

"I was a fool to give that promise not to tell Stansfield," thought he. "I have thrown away a valuable weapon of self-defence."

Soon after, Stansfield came in, florid, suave, prosperous-looking as ever. Victor had not seen him since his meeting with Mr. Malreward, and he was so painfully conscious of the crime which his father had committed, and that Stansfield knew he was a forger, that for very shame the young man reddened, stammered, looked

down, as he greeted his brother-in-law. The lawyer saw and noted everything.

"He has been doing something he is ashamed of, or I am very much mistaken. Well, he is a young man I shall never trust further than I can see him."

Stansfield smiled at his wife and took her hand in his. Freddy smiled at him in return, and they looked like the very happiest of married couples. But Victor noticed presently the change that came over Freddy; she grew constrained and silent; she was not the same girl who had been talking and laughing with him before her husband came home. Perhaps he took his sister's part more than he was inclined to own to her—perhaps the consciousness that Stansfield knew the stain which rested on his father irritated him—but Victor felt he had never liked his brother-in-law so little as he did that evening.

When the long elaborate five courses had been at last got through—for though there was no other guest than Victor, the host always liked doing things in style—and they were dawdling over their dessert, Freddy suddenly saw her husband's eyes fixed upon her. "I know what that means," she thought. "I hope you are both coming with me to the drawing-room," she said; "it is really a farce your sitting here over

your wine, when Victor never takes any."

"I see no reason, my love, why we should not conform to the usual customs of society"—and Stansfield rose, and opened the door for his wife, thus beautifully combining his marital rights with his gentlemanly duties. He sat down again and poured himself out another glass of sherry, with a self-satisfied smile.

"Confound the fellow!" thought Victor quite incensed. "I wish somebody would give him a good setting down." But not just then seeing his way to do it, he remained silent, until Stansfield made some remark about the estate, which he answered with an irritation that did not escape the lawyer. "Do let us drop that everlasting subject, I am sick of it. You know nothing more can be done until Mr. Malreward writes to me. For the life of me I can't think why he does not;" and then remembering his promise, he reddened and bent down his head over his walnuts.

Presently Victor looked up again and said abruptly, "Stansfield—Deverell has left me and gone to America."

"Indeed, how is that? I thought he was just going to get married."

"So he was—and I don't know any particulars, I was perfectly taken by surprise—but I believe he has had some quarrel with the girl's

family—the Alresfords, you know—and he was determined to throw everything up and emigrate, and nothing I could do or say had any effect upon him. I have never felt more cut up about anything in my life.”

“Well now, Victor—” and Stansfield smiled a little scornfully—“romantic notions are all very well, but it cannot be a pleasant thing to have a man in his peculiar position in one’s near neighbourhood. Both for Frederica’s sake and for Helen’s—as we are to be so nearly connected—I am most thankful that he has left the place. There was no knowing at any moment that the secret of his birth might not come out. A man in that class is rather inclined to boast of it than otherwise.”

“How little you understand!” burst out Victor; then he checked himself, and vehemently tugged at his moustache. “What was the use of talking to Stansfield? No wonder that Freddy found him obtuse and unsympathising; what a wretched life she must have with the man.”

About an hour afterwards, Victor, longing to escape into more congenial society, was allowed to return to the drawing-room. Freddy was brooding over the fire, doing nothing; but directly Stansfield entered she hastily took up a morsel of embroidery, and pretended to be busy over it,

Stansfield flattered himself that he had now thoroughly tamed this odd, impetuous, independent girl into a quiet, domesticated, submissive wife. Having been bewitched, almost irritated, into trying to win her, because she was totally unlike the other girls he knew—now that he had made her his wife he took pains to rub off her angles, to subdue her individuality, to press her down into the conventional mould of society, so that she might become as much like other married ladies as possible. He little guessed that the mind and character he so repressed, only turned inwards and grew all the stronger, but with a morbid, dangerous growth; that beneath her silence there sometimes raged passions which some day, when he least expected it, might, like a boiling torrent, burst their bounds. When Stansfield exerted his authority, as he was very fond of doing, Freddy generally submitted without a word. There was nothing she had more strongly impressed upon herself than the degradation of squabbles between husband and wife. Stansfield wanted to have his own way. Well, let him have it, and much good might it do him, but she would not lower her dignity by quarrelling with him; nothing was worth it. Nor was it Freddy's nature to coax and flatter and wheedle, and win him by ignoble motives to do what he never would have yielded to any appeals to his

reason or sense of justice. "No," she thought with a quiet scorn, "he may hold the harem theory about women, I do not. The world will never get any purer so long as women are taught that the sole object of their existence is to please men." And so, he might in petty, galling ways interfere with her personal liberty, his presence might seem to pervade her whole life, until at times she felt suffocated, but her soul and mind he never should control. Undoubtedly Stansfield was master, for the inferior partner always rules in the household, the superior will rather yield in trifles than dispute about them.

Victor had been several days in Oxford. He had hardly settled down to work again; he had many friends to look up, and much talking about the past vacation to be done. Amidst all the hearty greetings which he received and gave, the miserable thought would sometimes cross his mind—"What would they say if they knew that I was the son of a forger?" But he tried to comfort himself—notwithstanding Mr. Malreward's reminder that the bond between them could never be broken, and that whatever sins he committed his son must help him pay the penalty of them—Victor told himself that, after all, every man is judged according to his own works, not the works of any other man.

Victor's rooms were little altered since we saw them last, only the photograph of the Rector of Tregalva was deposed from its place above the bedroom mantelpiece, and one of Helen Erle set up instead; and Arthur Byrne only smiled at his degradation, remembering the words: "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother—"

One morning, soon after his return to Oxford, Victor found a packet of letters on his table. He tossed them over eagerly. "Still none from Mr. Malreward. This is getting more and more extraordinary. And not one from Helen. Well, I must not be exacting, but I did hope—I have not heard from her for more than a week. One from Uncle Arthur, at all events; he never fails me," and Victor tore open and read a genial, amusing letter, some passages of which made him laugh heartily. It was a long time before he laughed again. He looked over the rest. "No end of tradesmen's circulars, as usual; and I declare—here is a letter from dear old Freddy! how did I come to overlook it?"

"Arbutus Villa, Donnistone, Oct. 15th.

"MY DARLING VICTOR,—We are in great trouble. You must get leave of absence, and come home again immediately. Mr. Malreward has been at the Court, and has met with a

severe accident; not a moment is to be lost. Telegraph what train you are coming by; I will meet you at Malreward station and tell you all the particulars. I cannot write more now. Your loving sister,

“FREDDY.”

Then followed a few lines, evidently dashed off in still greater hurry and perturbation, with a splash on the paper that looked like a tear.

“P.S.—Stansfield has just come in again, and he says I cannot meet you at the station, he will do so himself.”

Victor was in a state of bewilderment and excitement when, that afternoon, he sprang from the railway carriage upon the little platform of Malreward station. He noticed, half-unconsciously, that the superintendent and the porter neglected the other passengers and their luggage to stare at him in a curious, wondering, awe-stricken way; but he pushed past them to where the dignified Mr. Erle stood, a little in the background, with a face as solemnly business-like as that of a judge at Assizes.

“How is he? What has happened to him?” Victor began impetuously; but Stansfield took him by the arm, and with the whispered words, “Come along the road, I cannot talk to you here,” he hurried him out through the station,

and away from a group of country people who stood staring and gossiping and shaking their heads.

They walked a few yards in silence; long purple shadows and moist brown leaves lay across their road, beside them were the grey mottled trunks of beech trees, and overhead green and golden clouds of foliage. Then, in almost the same spot, as Victor remembered afterwards, in which Deverell had told him of the death of Harry Malreward, the son and heir, which death had altered the whole course of Victor's life, Stansfield spoke these words: "It is a much worse accident than you imagine. I would not let Freddy tell you in her letter. But—Victor, your father is no more."

There was a start, a quiver, but not a word of reply. Victor could not speak, his heart bounded with a relief—a rapture he dared not own even to himself. To have feared he knew not what fresh misery and shame, and then to hear that he was free—free for the rest of his life! Then the reaction came, and he shuddered all over. What had he been doing? He had been rejoicing at his father's death!

Stansfield went on in his grave deliberate way—"It is a most shocking affair altogether. You see we cannot tell exactly how he met with this accident which has proved fatal. Last

evening, just as I was leaving my office, one of the woodmen on your father's estate came rushing in, with a most scared and bewildered manner, to tell me that he had found Mr. Malreward lying dead in the old quarry below Southwood; you remember the spot, I daresay? On one side, you know, the quarry is level with the lane leading to Dormer Farm, but on the other side the ground rises at least twelve feet above it, quite precipitously, in fact. It was just under the steep side of the quarry that he was found. I gave notice to the police, sent for Radcliffe, and we went all together to the spot. Mr. Malreward had evidently been dead several days, perhaps a week. The only marks of violence about him were a bruise on his shoulder, and a deep indentation at the side of his head. These might have been produced by his falling upon the rough ground of the quarry from the height above, or—they might not. The question remains—how did he meet with his death? Did he fall accidentally into the quarry? Was he pushed in? He was not robbed, his watch and diamond ring, and a sum of money in his pocket, were all found upon him; he was not robbed, that is certain; but—*was he murdered?*”

Victor had listened to this story in silence, but all the while his face had been growing whiter, till every drop of blood had left it; his eyes di-

lated with an increasing horror, till, at the last solemnly spoken words, he wrenched away his arm from Stansfield, and staggered half across the road.

"Not *murdered*! No, no! for God's sake, man, don't say that!"

"And why should I not say it?" returned Stansfield's calm, pitiless voice.

"I can't—I can't go on, I feel quite sick." The road just there was bounded by a low wall, and on this Victor dropped down. With his elbows on his knees, and his face hidden in his hands, he rocked himself to and fro; great drops started out upon his forehead. And all the while Stansfield looked him through and through with cold clear eyes, as a surgeon, who cared for nothing but science, might watch the agonies of a patient under the knife.

"Well," the lawyer said at last, "of course it is very natural that you should feel the shock a great deal; but you ought to remember how much devolves upon you now, and all that you have to do. The inquest is to be held to-morrow."

"The inquest!" Victor took his hands from before his face, and stared at his brother-in-law with blank, bewildered eyes, and yet eyes that seemed conscious all the time of some ghastly, half comprehended terror. "The inquest! and

then it will all come out," he said slowly, under his breath. Then suddenly, as if some great emergency had given him strength, he rose, trembling all over, and took Stansfield's arm again. "Let us walk on," he said, trying to speak calmly. "Look here, Stansfield, there must not be an inquest. Manage it somehow for me; it must be all hushed up; do you understand?"

"I understand," replied the lawyer, in a hard matter-of-fact tone, "that you are quite unfit to do or think of anything until you have recovered yourself a little. You don't know what you are saying; and really, for your own sake, you had better be silent."

Victor made no answer, and as they walked on he seemed to be pondering deeply. The one awful thought which at the first moment had stunned him, now sharpened all his faculties to understand the situation, and to act upon it. At last he said, "What is your opinion as to the cause of my father's death?"

"Well," answered Stansfield, who was intending just then to ask questions, rather than to answer them, "I cannot form any settled opinion until I have further evidence to go upon; but I have my suspicions. And so, it appears, *have you.*"

Stansfield turned sharply round, and looked

Victor full in the face. Victor's eyes fell; the blood rushed back to his cheeks; he muttered doggedly, "I have said nothing—I have implicated no one."

"Now, look here, Victor, as Mr. Malreward's son-in-law, and I presume I may say your legal adviser——"

"Of course, of course," replied Victor.

"It is my painful duty to ask you a few questions, and yours to candidly answer them. What reason did Mark Deverell give you for leaving England?"

"I thought I told you—that he had had a quarrel with the Alresfords."

"And was there anything in his words or manner which led you then, or leads you now, to suspect that he was not telling you the whole truth?"

Victor made no answer. Stansfield felt the hand resting on his arm tremble violently. The lawyer looked at his brother-in-law with fixed inquiring eyes, and at last Victor said, in a sort of desperation, "I really don't see that I am bound to answer your questions."

"You are not bound to answer my questions, certainly. But remember you will be sworn to answer the Coroner's. And don't you think you had better put me in possession beforehand of all the evidence you will have to give at the

inquest to-morrow? After all," said Stansfield with a shrug of his shoulders, "nothing you can say will do Mark Deverell any harm. He is half way across the Atlantic by this time." For those were pre-cable days; and once a criminal had set sail from Liverpool, he was safe.

"Yes, thank God for that!" replied Victor, unconscious of the admission he was making. "But it is a dreadful thing to blacken a man's character when he is not at hand to defend himself."

"If Deverell chooses to leave the country under the most suspicious circumstances possible, his character must take care of itself. Depend upon it, my dear fellow, speaking the truth never injured anybody more than he or she deserved. It is your duty to society to make known every circumstance which has come to your knowledge connected with your father's death, and Deverell's disappearance. And it is your duty to your family to show some regard to your father's memory—not to seem anxious, to say the very least, to shield the man you yourself suspect of being his murderer."

"No, no, Stansfield, for heaven's sake don't say that! The utmost I for one moment suspected was, that there had been a violent quarrel between them—that Mr. Malreward had somehow irritated him beyond all bearing—that

Deverell had struck him, and he fell. He never intended to do it—he was the kindest-hearted fellow, only hasty at times.”

Then Victor suddenly paused. The thought rushed over him, “Why, it might have been myself!” He remembered what he had said and felt during his last interview with Mr. Malreward. “Say that again and I will kill you!” had been his actual words. He had all but raised his hand to strike his father, and Deverell—probably under similarly great provocation—had done it. Only the merest chance, or rather the mercy of God, had saved him from being what Deverell was—a parricide escaping from the hands of justice. He shuddered; it was as if he had a glimpse into hell.

Then a forlorn hope gave him a momentary relief. “After all, what reason have we to suppose that Deverell was not speaking the truth, when he said his quarrel with the Alresfords was the cause of his leaving England?”

“This reason—that the Alresfords have positively stated to me that no quarrel or cause of quarrel existed between them; that on the evening of the 6th of October Deverell parted on the best of terms with the whole family; that they saw and heard nothing more of him until the morning of the 9th, when Lucy Alres-

ford received a few incoherent lines, written by him from Liverpool, accusing himself of breaking her heart, and blighting her life, and so forth, but that he felt he was not fit to be her husband, and that therefore he had left the country for ever, winding up with blessings, and hopes that she might soon meet someone more worthy of her, and all that kind of thing. Of course the poor girl is half distracted, and does not know what to think; but her father thinks the same as I do, and as you cannot help doing."

Victor said no more. He felt that his last hope was gone. He groaned to himself, "It is too awful. I don't know how to bear it. My poor old Deverell!"

Stansfield had always considered that Victor's friendship with Deverell was a sign of the young Squire's taste for low company. He said very gravely, "It hardly matters how you talk to me, but I hope you will have the decency to restrain yourself a little in public, and not seem to be ready to fraternize with the man who to all appearances killed your father—though whether deliberately, or in the heat of passion, does not yet appear. Let the secret of his birth remain a secret. Remember the honour of your family; remember your sister—and Helen."

If it had not been for that last word, it is

probable that Victor would have burst into some angry retort. As it was, he simply dropped Stansfield's arm, and walked on in silence.

The lawyer said presently, in a much gentler tone—he had no intention of breaking, by any harshness on his own part, any of the fine threads he was weaving round his brother-in-law—“Come, my dear fellow, you must not be offended with anything I have thought it my duty to say. I am a much older man than you are, you know, and your solicitor, not to mention other ties. My only desire is to help you in this terrible family trouble which has fallen upon both of us. Let us be perfectly frank with each other. There are reasons which make it a matter of astonishment to me that your father ventured to return to Malreward Court. Were you aware that he had done so?”

Victor turned scarlet, hesitated, finally, remembering what were those reasons of which Stansfield spoke, and that he had shown Mr. Malreward great forbearance at a time when he was not, or appeared likely to be, connected with him by marriage, and longing, in his grief and bewilderment, for the counsel of a sensible man like Stansfield, he determined to tell him all. No, not quite all. There were certain words he had uttered to his father, which were now between himself and God, which respect

for the dead would restrain him from confessing, save to Him alone.

“Well, Stansfield, various little circumstances led me to suspect that Mr. Malreward was in the neighbourhood, and on the evening of the 6th, I think it was, yes, the 6th certainly, just as it was getting dusk, I met him quite accidentally in Southwood. I asked him why he came home secretly, and after a time he told me—you know what, Stansfield.” And Victor looked down in shame and confusion.

“Yes, I know,” replied Stansfield, very kindly, for here he could fully understand and sympathise with Victor’s emotion. “Never mind, Victor. That secret, at all events, shall be buried with him.”

“Well, then I wanted to know how he dared run the risk of returning to England, and he told me he must have more money. I was not inclined to listen to him at first, but referred him to you; however, in the end we came to an agreement. He pledged himself to return to the Continent at once, and I pledged myself to keep the fact of his visit to England a secret; he promised not to molest me in the possession of the estate, and in return he was to have an income of £800 a year for the future. We parted on good terms, with the understanding he was to start for Paris the following day, and to write

to me as soon as he got there; and ever since I have been looking for his letter which never came, little thinking——” And Victor abruptly broke off.

“And was this all that passed between your father and you?”

“I—I have told you the subject of our conversation. It is impossible to remember every word we said.”

Of course Stansfield saw that there was still something left unrevealed. But he said no more for the present.

By this time they had reached Malreward Court. Very silent did the old house appear in the autumnal sunshine; every window was shrouded with a blind or shutter. Not a human being, not a sound of life seemed anywhere about the place. The still, golden brightness of the afternoon, the calm decaying trees, the hectic flush of colour, the fallen leaves everywhere, the subdued and pensive song of a solitary thrush—all smote Victor with a sense of unutterable melancholy. “How it all reminds me of the day I came here first, just after Harry died. They have brought my father’s body home, I suppose?”

“Yes, it is lying there, in his own room.”

It and his—strange medley of pronouns! His—the living, breathing man of the past. It—the senseless, decaying body of the present.

The old servants came forward with a subdued bustle and agitation, to receive the new Lord of the Manor, curious to see how he looked and how he bore himself, somewhat perturbed about their own future, and anxious to worship the rising sun. He spoke to them kindly, but with a hurried, absent manner; and when Mrs. Jennings began to make some clumsy excuses for having denied all knowledge of Mr. Malreward's return, he hastily silenced her. "Never mind; it is better to say nothing more about that."

The lawyer sat with him an hour or two, and helped him to make the necessary arrangements respecting the inquest to-morrow. They discussed the chances for and against the bringing in of a verdict of Accidental Death, and Stansfield at last succeeded in getting Victor to commit himself to an opinion of Deverell's guilt. He did not say so to his brother-in-law, but the lawyer believed that popular feeling was already so much excited with regard to the keeper, that the only way in which the family could guard themselves against all suspicion of having connived at his escape—a suspicion which, among other unpleasant consequences, would probably have led to the fact of his near relationship being discovered—the only way the family could guard themselves against this suspicion was to swim with the stream, and to openly proclaim Deve-

rell to be Mr. Malreward's murderer, who had unhappily escaped from justice.

Stansfield really felt sorry for the poor young Squire. He thought of the day, not three weeks ago, that they had all gone shooting together, Victor, Deverell, and himself. What bright, boyish spirits Victor had been in!—how he had laughed and whistled as they went along!—how Deverell had borne himself with a frank, honest, confident air, no longer the sombre, moody man he had been in Mr. Malreward's day, the fierce head-keeper, whose mere look had struck terror into trespassers—how, though head-keeper still, a smile, a glance had once passed between himself and the young Squire, which told of their peculiar terms of friendship. Between that day and this what a black gulf there lay of mystery and crime! Stansfield felt really sorry for the young Squire, whose coming into his kingdom was in a manner so tragic and blood-stained, so made notorious by the gossip and clamour of half the county. Everybody was talking of Mr. Malreward's dreadful end. The mere finding of a dead man in a lonely and disused quarry, the mystery of how he came there—whether he had fallen accidentally, when tipsy, everybody charitably added; whether he had met with foul play, and if so, by whom, and for what motive—was a feast

for those vultures, the scandal-mongers of a country town. But added to all this, the corpse was that of Mr. Malreward, a man who all his life long had lived in the odour of disreputableness—about whom, foul, wicked stories had always hung, as mould and cobwebs hang about dark and decaying places—who three years ago had disappeared from his home, no one knew why, and now had as stealthily come home again, but only, as it seemed, to die; and it was no wonder that excitement and curiosity raged like an epidemic fever. Amidst all the hum of gossip, one ominous question began to be heard more and more loudly, “What has become of Mark Deverell, the Malreward head-keeper?”

Something in Victor’s worn, white, exhausted looks, moved Stansfield, and he advised him to take some refreshment. “I cannot eat—I should be choked if I did.”

“Then have a glass or two of wine, Victor. You are looking wretchedly ill.”

“No, most certainly not. If I were to touch wine in the state I am now, I could not answer for myself where I should end. Total abstinence is my only chance of salvation. I have known that a long time.” Then he added, bitterly—“I never thought to make that confession to you, Stansfield. But you have it

now, and you can do what you like with it."

"I shall never think of it again," said Stansfield, courteously. "If there is nothing more that I can do for you now, I think I will go home. I shall be with you again early to-morrow morning."

"If you have no objection, Stansfield, I shall ride over to your house after dark. I really don't think I can stand the whole evening here alone."

Stansfield, as he usually did, wished Victor anywhere but at Arbutus Villa, but he could not but answer, "Come by all means. But"—he hesitated—"I need hardly caution you to be careful what you say before Frederica. I do not wish my wife to know more about this terrible affair than is absolutely unavoidable."

"Certainly the caution is hardly needed," was Victor's somewhat haughty answer. ("As if I did not understand and consider Freddy more than you do!" thought he.)

Victor wrote two hurried letters, one to Helen, one to his uncle, to acquaint them with Mr. Malreward's death. He said merely that the cause of his death appeared to be the fall into the quarry. Not even to the Rector did he mention his suspicions of Mark Deverell. He had been lying upon the library sofa for about half an hour—for by this time he had a racking

headache—and had fallen into an uneasy doze, when Jennings came in and said, “Please, Mr. Victor, George Hoskins wants to speak to you.”

“Who?—what? George Hoskins!—that under-keeper that I discharged the other day? Confound his impudence!—send him about his business!”

Victor was trying to compose himself to sleep again, when Jennings entered once more. “Very sorry, sir,” he said, apologetically, “but he says he won’t go away without seeing you, and nothing I can do will make him. He says he has come about something most important.”

“Send him about his business, do you hear me!” cried Victor, half beside himself with fatigue and nervous irritability. “Tell him, if he comes bothering me again, I will send the police after him. And look here, Jennings, don’t come into the room again, whatever happens.”

Jennings, by repeating his young master’s threat, at last got rid of the late under-keeper. Hoskins went off muttering, “Send the police after me, will yer, young Squire!—much more likely have ’em after yourself.”

Victor spent a few hours with the Erles that evening—hours melancholy and constrained enough. Still, it was better than remaining in the great, gloomy, echoing Malreward Court, where the air seemed thick with ghastly ru-

mours and forecastings, and the dead body of Mr. Malreward lay awaiting the inquest, which, to Victor's morbidly-excited imagination, was a very Day of Judgment, on the morrow. Freddy, though she had not seen her father since she was a baby, was of course shocked and scared at the family tragedy, little as she guessed Victor's fears and suspicions. She said very little to her brother ; she instinctively felt that what he wanted that evening was to have the comfort of human companionship, and yet to be allowed to sit silent. She exerted herself to talk to Stansfield upon trivial subjects, in order that Victor might be left in peace. But now and then her eyes, full of unutterable sympathy, would rest upon the younger man, who sat with his pale, worn face bowed down, brooding over the fire ; her voice, when she did address him, was modulated with such tenderness, she showed such tact, such thoughtfulness for his comfort, that Stansfield at last could bear it no longer.

"I don't wish to drive you away, Victor ; pray stay as long as you like ; but it is past eleven o'clock, and I really think, my love—" he said to Freddy—"you had better go to bed."

Freddy returned her husband's look with a sort of flame in her eyes and on her cheeks. "Excuse me, Stansfield, as long as my brother

is here I shall remain with him. It is little enough that I see of him as it is." ("Thanks to you," she was ready to add).

Victor arose instantly, with a vague sense of annoyance, of being somehow a bone of contention between the married pair. "I am very sorry to have kept you up, I had no idea it was so late. Good night, darling," and he kissed Freddy. "Good night, Stansfield," very coldly; "pray don't trouble yourself to come to the door."

As Victor was riding home that pitch-dark night, and had just struck into a narrow lane, a man suddenly sprung out of the hedge and seized Boadicea by the bridle.

"What do you want, fellow? let go!" Victor thought he was in for an encounter with some modern shabby representative of the ancient order of highwaymen. He instinctively changed his hold on his whip, bringing the handle, a heavy silver one, uppermost; and he kept a sharp look-out for the enemy's counter weapon, which appeared—so far as he could judge in the darkness—to be merely a stick cut out of the hedge.

Then a thick, surly voice, which he at once recognized to be that of George Hoskins, answered—"I have been waiting here these hours for you, young Squire, and now you had best

stop and hear what I've got to say, or 'twill be the worse for you to-morrow. I know something about you as——”

“Get out of my way, or I will ride over you,” Victor, irritated beyond all bearing at this persistent insolence, brought his whip-handle down upon the knuckles of the hand which grasped his reins. Hoskins let them drop with an oath, Boadicea sprang forward, and in another moment Victor was galloping along the lane.

By the time he reached the Court, however, Victor felt a little vexed with himself for his impetuosity. “I might as well have listened to what he had to say. He must have had some strong motive for so perseveringly seeking me. I cannot for the life of me imagine what he wanted. Could he have had something to tell me about Deverell? Well, I suppose all that there is to be known will be made known—to-morrow.” And again Victor shivered with the thought of that dreadful to-morrow, when, as it seemed to him, “the secrets of all hearts would be disclosed.”

CHAPTER IV.

The breath
 Of accusation kills an innocent name,
 And leaves for lame acquittal the poor life,
 Which is a false mask without it. 'Tis most false
 That I am guilty of foul parricide.

SHELLEY.

THE inquest was being held in the dining-room of Malreward Court; the jury had viewed the body of the late Squire, the woodman who had found the corpse, Dr. Radcliffe, and the policeman who had been summoned, had given their brief and simple evidence; the Jennings' had borne witness to Mr. Malreward's unexpected return home on the night of the 5th of October, and the strict commands he had laid upon them to keep secret the fact of his being in the house; and now the turn for the son and heir had come, and Victor was summoned into the presence of the Coroner and the jury, Dr. Radcliffe and Stansfield Erle.

The young master of the house stood to be sworn, examined, and to be dismissed when

they had done with him, before these men, seated in his own dining-room, representatives of the law, which is above every man. He was very pale, there was a slight tremor in his voice ; but he was self-possessed and clear-headed, being conscious of the importance of the inquiry, which might lead to the branding or the clearing of Mark Deverell's name. The Coroner, a Mr. Netherby, a hard-featured, somewhat sharp-spoken man, began by asking Victor when and where he had last seen the deceased Mr. Malreward.

To which he replied what we know already, between five and six o'clock on the evening of the 6th of that month, in that part of the covers known as Southwood. The conversation between them lasted, as far as he could judge, about half an hour, and turned upon private family matters connected with the re-settlement of the estate. He had seen or heard nothing more of the deceased until he had received a letter from his sister, Mrs. Stansfield Erle, informing him of the fact that his father had met with an accident.

"Did you meet with any person on your way to or from Southwood the evening of your meeting with the deceased?" The question being answered in the negative, the Coroner proceeded, "Had you reason to suppose that

any other person was in or near the wood at the time?"

Victor paused a moment. "I heard the report of a double-barrelled gun in Southwood, as I was crossing the park on my way thither." Then he coloured and bit his lip, for he saw that he had made an unlucky admission.

The Coroner instantly took advantage of it. "What person or persons employed or residing on the Malreward estate are in the habit of carrying a double-barrelled gun?"

"Besides myself, no one that I am aware of, excepting Mark Deverell, the head-keeper."

"Do neither of the under-keepers ever carry a double-barrelled gun?"

"I have never seen either of them with one."

"What time on the evening of the 6th did you return to the Court?"

"About seven, so far as I can remember—yes, it was seven, I know. I recollect Jennings complaining that the fish was spoilt by my being half an hour late for dinner; and I had ordered it that day for half-past six."

"After your interview with the deceased, when and where did you see Mark Deverell, the head-gamekeeper?"

"On the following evening, at his lodge."

"Did he then tell you of his intention of going to America?"

"He did."

"What reason did he give for it?"

"That he had offended or had quarrelled with Mr. Alresford, or some member of his family."

"Did you believe that reason to be the true one?"

"I did—at the time."

"But you do not now?"

"No—that is, I cannot say positively. I have had no communication with Mr. Alresford, or with any of his family." And then Victor looked imploringly at the farmer, who was foreman of the jury, hoping that he would ask him some question which would show that the Alresfords were in possession of fresh evidence favourable to Deverell; but Alresford only looked upon the floor, with an anxious and desponding face.

"Did Mark Deverell give you any reason to suppose that he had had a disagreement with any other person?"

"Certainly not. Of that I am positive."

"Where did you part from him on the evening of the 7th?"

"At the door of the lodge."

"Have you since then had any communication whatever with him?"

"I have merely received a few lines written

by him from Liverpool, just as he was going on board the New York steamer."

"Can you produce that letter?"

"No. Thinking it of no consequence, I destroyed it just before I went up to Oxford the other day." Victor tried to speak in a careless tone—he was conscious that, as Stansfield had told him last evening, he had done the most damaging thing possible for Deverell's character and his own credit in tearing up that little note.

"I think we have no further questions to put to you at present, Mr. Malreward," said the Coroner, after closely examining Victor as to the contents of Deverell's letter.

Victor bowed. As he was leaving the room, he heard the Coroner say, "Call George Hoskins." He was startled as he crossed the hall, to meet the late under-keeper, who gave him a triumphant leer. "Fool that I was not to let him speak to me last night," thought the young Squire; "not of course that it would have done any good, except saving me this horrible suspense. He has some fresh evidence to give about poor Deverell, that is certain."

As Victor sat alone in the library, with the sensations of one who had been skating on thin ice, trying to speculate as to what Hoskins could possibly have to say, trying to recall all that he

himself had said, two contradictory thoughts possessed him—"After all, whatever evidence may be brought to light, Deverell is on his way to America, safe out of the clutches of the law." And then a sad, despairing feeling—"Whatever verdict they may give, it cannot alter the fact—if it be a fact—that Deverell, the dearest, kindest fellow that ever lived, is guilty of a tremendous crime."

In about a quarter of an hour's time, Victor was recalled to the dining-room. As he entered, he became conscious that something startling and unexpected had happened. There seemed a stir of excitement and curiosity in the very air; the jurymen looked at the young Squire, not only as though they had never seen him before, but as though he were a novel and portentous monster. It was Stansfield's look, however, which alarmed Victor. Never before had he seen the lawyer so perturbed—his face was red, his eyebrows were knitted, he was biting his nails furiously—always with him a token of extreme annoyance. As Victor advanced, Stansfield raised his head, and fixed his eyes upon him with a hard, penetrating, menacing stare. Dr. Radcliffe bent forward, with a most sorrowful, wondering, anxious face. Mr. Netherby, hardened to surprises and sensational incidents, alone looked unmoved as the young Squire, his

heart beating very fast, aware that some crisis was at hand, again walked up the room.

"Mr. Malreward, it is necessary to ask you a few more questions. Before I do so, I must caution you to be very careful as to your statements, as they may be used against you."

"Used against *me*!" thought Victor. "What on earth does he mean? It cannot be that I am accused of withholding any facts about Deverell?"

"During the whole of your interview with the deceased on the evening of the 6th inst., were you and he on perfectly friendly terms together?"

Victor started, a horror and bewilderment came over him, as if that thin ice of which I have spoken had suddenly cracked at his feet, and he had glimpsed black, fathomless depths below.

"He—he certainly said one or two things that rather provoked me. We were quite friends again when we parted—quite."

"Recollect you are upon your oath. Did you, or did you not, in answer to some remark of the deceased, say, 'If you repeat those words I will kill you?'"

Victor sprung back as if Mr. Netherby had fired a pistol in his face. Then he stood staring at him, his eyes dilated, his lips parted, his face like death.

Stansfield here whispered something to the Coroner, who immediately said—"You are not bound to answer this question, Mr. Malreward. But I wish to give you the opportunity of denying upon oath the fact of your using those words or words similar to them, if it is possible for you to so."

Victor's eyes fell; his head drooped, he clasped his hands together; thus he stood before them all, put to open shame. In those few moments, while every eye was fixed upon him, while the silence was so deep that no one seemed to breathe, and the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece, and the sighing of the trees out-of-doors in the autumnal wind, seemed to have become loud and distinct voices—Victor had some foretaste of that awful day when, as we are told, the soul stands naked before its Judge, and the multitudes of accusing witnessing spirits, when the words which were whispered in the ear are proclaimed upon the housetop, and the sins which were done in darkness are set in the light of the countenance of God. At last he raised his head, and with the hot blood burning his cheeks, his forehead, his very neck, he looked the Coroner steadily in the face and said, with a sad solemn simplicity, "I did speak those words to my father. I am very sorry for them now."

"And will you admit that he said, 'I believe you want to murder me,' and that you replied, 'I believe you want to drive me to it'?"

"Yes, that is quite true."

"Did you tell the deceased also that there never would be any peace for you as long as he was alive? I must again caution you to be careful in all your answers."

"I can only say that it is all true." And then all at once Victor gave a little smothered cry, as though the torture were growing more than he could endure.

Mr. Netherby went straight on, whilst Dr. Radcliffe threw himself back in his chair, with a sigh of relief; and Stansfield fidgetted, frowned, and bit his nails to the quick. "Will you state what was the cause of dispute between yourself and the deceased?"

"I—I would rather not answer that question."

Here Mr. Alresford put an eager enquiry. "But you said, Mr. Victor, that you and your father were quite friends when you parted?"

"Yes, when we parted, we were."

The Coroner resumed: "Can you indicate the exact spot in Southwood at which you parted from the deceased?"

"As far as I can remember, it was near the little shed where the watchers occasionally sleep."

There was a sort of thrill, "sensation in the

court," as newspapers say. For the quarry in which Mr. Malreward's body had been found was not a hundred yards from that spot.

"When you went into Southwood that evening, did you carry with you any gun, stick, or any other weapon?"

"No," Victor answered wonderingly. Then suddenly it rushed upon him what it all meant—the stern minuteness of the Coroner's enquiries, the gloomy, doubtful, adverse faces round him, Stansfield's savage, humiliated look, as if a wild beast in him had been aroused and baited. Victor sprang forward. "Is it possible that—you think I——"

He was conscious that Stansfield, as if he could control himself no longer, had started up, and was saying something to him in a quick, imperative voice; then everything wavered, faded away, there was a strange roaring sound in his ears, and he dropped back into a chair.

He soon became aware that Dr. Radcliffe was with one hand holding a tumbler of water to his lips, and with the other was feeling the fluttering pulse at his wrist. "Drink this; you will be better directly, my dear boy," said the doctor very kindly.

Victor gulped down a few mouthfuls of water, sighed several times, opened his eyes, and came back to life and feeling—and the rack. He was

granted a few moments' respite, and then Mr. Netherby, who was "quite used to all that kind of thing," as he told Stansfield afterwards, went on with his questions quite unmoved. Victor had to go through a minute examination respecting his proceedings from the time at which he left Mr. Malreward in Southwood, until the time at which he met Mark Deverell at the lodge. At last he was dismissed, and weak, giddy, staggering, like some prisoner of the Inquisition just released from torture, he went back to the library, and unconscious that he was closely observed by the policeman who had been in attendance throughout the inquest, he shut the door, and threw himself down on the sofa in a state of utter collapse.

As soon as Victor had left the dining-room, Jennings was recalled, and questioned as to the exact hour at which his young master had returned to the Court on the evening of the 6th. Then he was asked whether Mr. Victor Malreward had appeared at all agitated when he came in.

"Well, rather," Jennings replied; "as though he had had a shock or fright, or something; and when I told him he was half an hour late, and dinner was getting cold, he said it didn't matter; he didn't want no dinner!" said the butler, with a note of exclamation.

"Was his dress in any way disordered; did he look as though he had been fighting or struggling? Were there any marks upon his clothes, as of mud or blood?"

"God bless you, sir, no!" cried Jennings, scared and scandalized. "Nothing of the kind, I swear to it."

The next witness that was summoned was young Alresford, Lucy's brother, Lucy herself having been spared the cruel ordeal of giving evidence which might seem prejudicial to her lover. Young Alresford swore positively to the friendly terms which existed between his family and Mark Deverell, up to the very moment of receiving the keeper's unexpected letter from Liverpool, which letter was produced and read; but incoherent and ambiguously worded as it was, it threw no further light upon the case. Then the coroner summed up, and the jury considered their verdict.

A long hush of expectancy in the house had been followed by a general buzz of voices and sound of footsteps, when Dr. Radcliffe crossed the hall, which seemed full of men passing slowly out, or standing together talking. He knocked at the library door, then, nothing daunted by the silence, he went in and closed the door behind him. Victor was lying on the sofa, with his face buried in the cushions. "My dear Mr.

Victor," said the doctor, "I am come to tell you the verdict. It is a tolerably satisfactory, if indecisive one. 'Found dead, but how he came to his end, no evidence to show.'"

Dr. Radcliffe saw the violent trembling which then seemed to shake Victor's whole body. He gave a deep sigh, and raised his pale face, with the hair all wild and tumbled about it. "Thank you for coming to tell me, Dr. Radcliffe. I wonder you did it. I wonder you will speak to me."

"My dear fellow, as a very old friend of yours, and of your uncle's, let me say one word. Don't grieve too much about the past; your frank and manly confession of penitence will, in the eyes of all your friends, atone for any words you may have used in the heat of passion."

"Then you don't think I——"

"Don't insult me! Now I must not stay another minute, my time is not my own. I shall be with you to-morrow at ten; that is the hour fixed for the funeral, I believe? Good-bye, and listen to a parting word of advice from your old doctor: have some food at once, and try to go to sleep, and take care of yourself, or you will be seriously ill."

"One moment, Dr. Radcliffe. Has any fresh evidence come out about Deverell?"

"Not a word—not a word. Poor unhappy

man!" and the doctor sighed, shook his head, and went away.

After he was gone, Victor began to feel a little comforted. The doctor's kind words were balm to his wounded self-respect, and made him feel that he might by-and-by hold up his head again. As for the verdict—well, he dared not think of the possible peril which he had escaped; like a man who by the merest chance has been rescued from drowning, or from falling down a precipice, it turned him sick even to imagine what might have been. But this much was certain: however slander might stab Deverell, the keeper was not openly branded as a murderer. Perhaps suspicion was so much diverted by the evidence which Hoskins had brought against the young Squire, that the jury, confused, thought the only fair course was to condemn no one, and therefore returned the open verdict which they had done. "If so," thought Victor, "if it has saved Deverell's name, I must not regret the dreadful situation I was forced to endure for a few minutes. Hoskins undoubtedly must have been hiding in the wood within hearing, whilst my father and I had that fatal conversation, and his motive for seeking me yesterday was probably to tell me this, in the hope that I should buy his silence. What ideas that kind of people must have about us!" thought the young

Squire, a Conservative for the nonce, with his "us" and "that kind of people." "I wish Stansfield would come to me. He must know my anxiety to hear all that he can tell me."

But the time passed on, and Stansfield did not come; the house seemed quiet as the grave, and at last Victor rang the bell for Jennings.

"Mr. Erle went away half an hour ago, with Mr. Netherby, sir," said the man. "I made bold to tell him I was sure you would want to see him before he left; but he said he could not stop, he had important business to see to; but that he should be here at ten o'clock to-morrow morning for the funeral."

"I think he might have spared me five minutes," thought Victor, "and not have left me till to-morrow to endure as best I can this suspense and solitude. Ah! well, I knew little more than a week ago what it was to have a brother. I shall never know again."

That afternoon, sick, trembling, feeling weak and bruised all over, like a man just recovering from illness, Victor was pacing slowly up and down the lawn, feeling a little revived by the genial autumn sun, and the cigar from which he took occasional whiffs, in the intervals of thought. He heard the sound of carriage wheels, and looking up, saw Mrs. Stansfield Erle driving her pony-carriage through the park. In another

minute she pulled up, tossed the reins to the groom, sprang out, and ran across the lawn towards her brother. As they met, she threw back a black veil which had covered her face; and he flung away his cigar. "My darling! my darling!" cried Freddy, "how are you?"

"Well, dear," he answered, with a wan smile, "after going through two such days as I have done, a man can hardly expect to feel very bright."

"I don't know whether I am welcome," she said. "I did not come to talk to you, only to see how you are. Stansfield has merely sent me a note from his office to tell me the verdict, and that he had to go some miles out of town on business this afternoon, and should not come home till late to-night. I don't know what he will say to me for being seen out of doors to-day, but I cannot help it. I could not bear to think of your being here alone to-day. Oh! what a day it must have been to you!"

Victor sadly thought how little Freddy knew of what that day had really been. He almost wished she had not come to the Court; she might indeed ask no questions, and offer him only the soft sympathy of her silence, yet the consciousness of how many circumstances connected with his father, with Deverell, he was forced to keep secret from her, seemed an aggravation of his

suffering he hardly knew how to bear. Then suddenly he thought—why should he keep these circumstances secret from her? She was Mr. Malreward's daughter, she was Victor's sister, yes, and she was Deverell's sister, before she had become Stansfield's wife. His resolution was quickly taken. Freddy should know all.

"Freddy, much has happened during the last week, much that you little guess. But why should I have any secrets from you? Next to Helen, you are just the dearest woman in the world to me. I have never kept any secrets from you yet, except one, and that was not wholly mine to tell. But I will tell you that, and everything now. Let us come into our mother's garden."

They went into that peaceful, sequestered, old-fashioned garden, with its quaint flowers, and box-edged walks, and here and there mouldering urns and rustic seats,—the garden which was in perfect order now, as it had been when Victor first came to live at the Court.

"Ah!" said he, "how Deverell looked after this little garden, and planted flowers in it, and kept the shrubbery trim year after year; and now he will never come here again—never! Have you no idea why he cared for this garden so much? It was our mother's, you know, and he loved every little thing that was hers. You

and I never knew her, but he did, and he has told me many things about her; how kind she was to him, almost as if he had been her own son." And so Victor went on and on, telling her how Deverell had repaid their mother's goodness by being kind to him, the lonely, sorrowful boy; how he had often shielded him from his father's violence; and how, though wild and sinful as Deverell was, his influence over him had been good, not evil—in his remorse for his own past, striving ever to keep the boy from contamination. And so by gentle degrees Freddy knew the truth, that Mark Deverell was Victor's brother, and her own.

"Poor fellow!—oh! poor fellow!" The tears ran down her face. "How little I knew! and I used to pass him with just a mere good morning, as if he were a servant, nothing more."

"But you see, dear, that is only as he wished it to have been. I know he never ceased regretting that Mr. Malreward had told me who he was. We were never quite the same afterwards; we cared more for each other, perhaps, but we were not quite so easy or so happy together." Then Victor went on to tell Freddy of their father's crime three years before, and of Stansfield's generous forbearance. "There are very few men who would have acted as Stansfield has done. He is such a high-minded, honour-

able fellow! What makes it more remarkable is, that in those days, you know, he was not in love with you."

Freddy blushed like a school-girl, but said nothing. It was not necessary to tell Victor how Stansfield boasted, with proud and fond caresses, that he had loved her from the first day he saw her—that day, nearly four years ago, at Tregalva, when he, a stranger coming to call upon the Rector, had caught her washing the tea-cups. He was only biding his time, said he. But he found it convenient to forget how long passion had struggled with prudence, before he had proposed to marry Mr. Malreward's daughter.

And now, with a broken voice and downcast eyes, Victor confessed how, goaded to madness by the discovery of Mr. Malreward's disgrace, he had uttered to his father threats, which had been brought up in witness against him that day by George Hoskins, the under-keeper, to put him to public shame. "I have just written," said Victor, "a few lines to Helen and to Uncle Arthur, merely to tell them the result of the inquest. But, Freddy, I shall have no peace of mind till I have confessed to each of them, as I have done to you, what I said to Mr. Malreward. Do you think Helen will trust herself with me when she knows what my temper can be?"

"Oh! Victor, do you think any woman worth

caring for would remember against you a few angry words? I know the way Mr. Malreward used to aggravate you must at times have been almost intolerable. I remember, in years gone by, when I have sometimes complained of Aunt Warner's tiresomeness, how Uncle Arthur used to pull me up quite sharply, and remind me of what you had to endure at Malreward Court, and that if it had not been for my father's threat that he would claim me, you would have run away long ago. I have never forgotten that, dear boy!" And Freddy looked at him with eyes full of love and pride.

"But now the worst is to come, the most dreadful thing of all that I have to tell you." Then Victor revealed to her his suspicions of Deverell's guilt. "I had thought that he had thoroughly reformed at last; he was going to marry, and live at Dormer Farm, and lead a sober, happy life. It makes one almost inclined to disbelieve in the mercy of God, and that there is a possibility of repentance and amendment for any man. That he did it deliberately, however, if he did it at all, I have never for one instant supposed. It was in some sudden madness of passion. It might have been myself, you know," he said, in a low voice, shuddering. "For one moment that evening I too was tempted to strike my father."

"Ah! but there is all the difference in the world between being tempted to do a thing, and doing it; as I am sure Uncle Arthur would say. But as regards Deverell—" Freddy could offer Victor no comfort except a few vague commonplaces—"perhaps he did not do it after all; perhaps he had some other motive for leaving England." Victor only shook his head, and remained silent.

At last he rose, and said, "Come, Freddy, we had better go back to the house; these autumnal afternoons are getting chilly." And he shivered; but it was not with cold. He gave a last look round the garden as they left it, and exclaimed passionately, "I would give my right hand to know that Deverell was innocent!"

Later in the evening, after Freddy had returned home, the Vicar, Mr. Groves—Victor's old friend and tutor—came to see him, with much hearty interest and sympathy. And so the day of the inquest passed away, and Victor thought that the worst was over.

The following morning Victor looked confidently for letters from Helen and from Mr. Byrne. He was aghast when the post came in, and still there were no tidings from his betrothed. "Is she ill? Has my letter been lost, or her reply? If I don't hear from her to-morrow, I shall at once go up to town. This

suspense is more than any man can stand."

The Rector wrote, of course, most kindly ; he said that he was much distressed at being unable to come to Victor in his trouble, but after calling upon all the clergy in the neighbourhood, he had found it impossible at such short notice to get any one to take his duty on the following Sunday. Arthur Byrne wound up by asking, "How soon will you be able to return to Oxford?"

Oxford! Victor put down the letter with a melancholy smile. He had almost forgotten that he had ever been an undergraduate, so much had happened during the last two days, so many years away from him seemed now his happy, honourable, hard-working college life, and the crowning triumphs of last Commemoration.

The persons who attended Mr. Malreward's funeral were Victor, the servants, and a crowd of villagers, whom curiosity, by no means regard for the deceased Squire, drew thither, the Vicar, who read the service, Dr. Radcliffe, and Stansfield Erle. The lawyer arrived at the last moment, and not a word was exchanged between him and his brother-in-law before the ceremony began. There was to be no formal gathering at the Court afterwards. Dr. Radcliffe had patients demanding his immediate attention; and Mr. Groves—such is life!—was

required to officiate at a village wedding. At the churchyard-gate, Victor said to Stansfield, "You will come home with me, will you not? There are so many things I want to talk over with you."

"And I wish to speak to you also," replied Stansfield, in a low, stern, altogether unexpected tone. "But the Court will not be the place for what I have to say. Will you come into the park with me; or do you prefer my writing to you?"

"Say what you have to say now and here, if you please," said Victor, startled and haughty.

Stansfield led the way across the emerald, glittering, red leaf-strewn grass. The two men walked a few yards in silence, when they came to an open space, where there was no possibility of any concealed George Hoskins overhearing them—Stansfield suddenly stopped, and confronted Victor with a hard, determined face.

"Now, it is not my intention to give any opinion upon the evidence I heard yesterday, or upon the wisdom of the verdict of the coroner's jury. It is enough for me to say, that the violence of the threats you acknowledge to have used to the deceased, which no imaginable provocation could excuse a son in uttering to his father, justify me in wishing to break off all connection with you, professional or otherwise.

If the verdict yesterday had been one adverse to you, I would, if you had wished me to do so, have served you to the best of my power, as your solicitor; but as you have come out of the inquiry legally unscathed, I have a right to make my own feelings as a gentleman my first consideration. I therefore request you not to enter my house again, to hold no communication whatever with my wife, and to inform me at your earliest convenience where I shall send those chests of deeds which belonged to the late Mr. Malreward, and which are now at my office."

Victor was so astounded that for some seconds he could not speak—he could only stare at his brother-in-law. "Stansfield," he said at last, "what have I done to deserve this?"

"Oh! that I will leave to your own conscience to decide. Meanwhile, understand me—you and Frederica don't meet again, either at my house or at your own. My wife I can and will protect from all association with you. And as for Helen—I was in London yesterday, and talked over the matter with her, and she quite agrees with me that her engagement with you must be broken off."

"You—you dare to say that!" Victor came a step forward, his face crimson, his eyes quite wild. "You liar!"

Victor had just sufficient sense left not to put

himself fatally in the wrong by attacking Helen's brother; but he hoped that Stansfield would strike him, so that they might close and fight it out for once and all. But the lawyer smiled scornfully—he could not be provoked into losing his temper. The utmost Victor could do was to blunt the fine edge of Stansfield's caution, and lead him to express somewhat stronger opinions than he had meant to do.

"This kind of thing is only what I expect from you. But I repeat it, it is Helen's wish to be released from her engagement, and she will return you all your letters and your presents by to-night's post."

"And if that were the case, what reason could she give for being so damnably false to me?" demanded Victor, an awful terror suddenly darting through him that this was the meaning of Helen's silence throughout his troubles.

"Keep your foul language for me, sir, whom it does not affect—don't apply it to my sister! If you wish to know our reasons, I will tell them to you, though I warn you they will not be pleasant ones for you to hear. In the first place, what you have admitted about your behaviour to your father is enough to deter any woman from wishing to place her happiness in your keeping. Secondly, you may have come

out of the inquiry yesterday untouched by the law, but certainly not by public opinion, as you will very soon find. I happen to know that the majority of the jurors wished to return a verdict which would have had the immediate result of a warrant being issued for your apprehension ; only the foreman, Alresford, your friend," said Stansfield, with contemptuous emphasis, " managed to talk them round to his way of thinking."

Victor was struck dumb. From head to foot he turned as cold as ice. Then he answered, trying to keep his voice steady, but with a sort of catch in his breath—" Very well, Mr. Erle ; the truth or falsehood of your various statements can be very easily proved. The only one that is of the slightest importance to me I shall at once begin to investigate. For the present, I wish you good morning, Mr. Erle."

The brothers-in-law—deadly foes, as I suppose I must now call them—raised their hats to each other, and walked away. Stansfield calmly returned to the mourning-carriage which was waiting for him at the churchyard gate, and was driven in it to Donnistone. Victor rushed into the Court, tore from his shoulders, with rage and horror and bewilderment, the crape scarf he wore for the dead father whom people said he had murdered, took some money from his desk, spoke a few hurried words to his

servants, telling them he was going to London, and would probably not return till after Sunday. "Helen will not let me go away again immediately," thought he, with a tender, troubled smile. "Forgive me, dear love, that I ever doubted you for one second; but why—oh! why have you not written to your poor Victor?"

At the station he found Mr. Alresford waiting for a down train. He was pacing slowly to and fro, his head bowed; he looked quite a broken-down old man. Victor rushed after him. "Good morning, Mr. Alresford; you are the very man I wanted to see. How is your daughter to-day?"

"Very poorly, thank you, sir, very poorly. I don't see as how she is to be otherwise," replied the farmer, with a heart-broken calmness. Victor cast down his eyes in gloomy silence; the secret of his relationship to Deverell—who was guilty in this respect, if in no other, that he had deserted his betrothed just before their wedding-day—made the young Squire feel himself partly responsible for her sufferings.

"Excuse my asking you, sir, but there was nothing, was there, in the note Mark wrote you from Liverpool that made you think about him—one way or another?"

"No; it was very foolish of me to destroy

that note, but I can assure you I repeated it word for word yesterday, and that it contained just those few lines, telling me that he was on the point of going on board the New York steamer—nothing more.”

“Oh! of course, sir—of course. I beg your pardon,” said Alresford hastily, feeling as though he had been asking if Victor had committed perjury. “You will forgive my anxiety, Mr. Victor; Mark was pretty much to me like my own son. I know, of course, that he had been at one time a sad wild fellow, and it was a very long while before I could make up my mind to let him have Lucy; but, you see, she was set upon it. There’s nothing that pleases a good woman more than the thought she is going to save a man’s soul, and half the time he breaks her heart instead. But still, as I was saying, the fellow had made us all care for him, somehow, and even now I can’t help feeling as though it was a son of my own that I had lost.”

“And what must I feel, I wonder?” thought Victor. He walked by the farmer’s side for a few minutes, trying to pluck up courage to ask him a question which was one of life or death to the young man. At last he said abruptly, striving to speak as though the matter scarcely concerned him, “By-the-by, Mr. Alresford, is

it true that some of the jury yesterday wished to make me out a murderer?"

The farmer started, looked red and uncomfortable. "Why, who ever told you that, sir?"

"Well, the question is, did my informant speak the truth?"

"You mustn't hearken to half you hear, Mr. Victor. Any man of sense can see which way the evidence really pointed, though there's nothing come out to convict him, or even to make us morally sure that he did it—thank God for that!"

"There is my train, then," said Victor, as the bell rang, "and I must cross the line. Good-bye, Mr. Alresford; it is all true, I suppose, and if so, I hardly know how to thank you. It seems that I owe almost everything in life to you. Good-bye," and with a warm shake of the hand, Victor was gone; and in five minutes more he was on his way to London.

CHAPTER V.

Can I think of her as dead, and love her for the love she bore?
No—she never loved me truly—love is love for evermore.

TENNYSON.

IT was quite a joyful surprise to Victor when, a few hours later, as he drove in a cab up to Mrs. Erle's small, but fashionably-situated house, near Kensington Gardens, the servant who opened the door told him that Miss Erle was at home, and at once ushered him upstairs into the drawing-room. He had been more shaken and alarmed by his interview with Stansfield that morning, and by the coincidence of receiving no letter from Helen, than he would acknowledge to himself. Therefore it was with a sensation of being safe at home again, anchored in some sure haven, that he found himself in the pretty, luxuriously-furnished room, where he had spent so many happy hours last summer. He was turning over the books on the table, hardly knowing what he was looking at, feeling only that he was amongst dear, familiar friends, when a light, well-known step, was

heard in the outer room, and he started up, thrilling with tender joy, impetuous, eager to clasp her in his arms; yet reverential, as he always had been to women, and to Helen above all other women.

She stood between the heavy purple folds of the *portière*, one white hand resting on the broad gold border; silvery, shimmering silken draperies falling about her; rich, dark hair shading her creamy neck and forehead—she stood, pale, beautiful, serene, her eyes a little down-cast, full of soft gloom; her full, pensive lips a little compressed together. Something in her look made Victor pause, keep silence, turn quite cold. He gazed at her, his haggard face seeming still whiter by the contrast with his deep mourning dress.

Then Helen glided towards him; she did not offer him her hand, she began in a sweet, perfectly composed voice, "As you have thought it right to come, I could not refuse to see you. But do you not think it would have been better if we had merely written to each other, once more?"

"Helen!" he began, imperiously, there being aroused in him a very masculine determination to begin by putting her in the wrong, and so be master of the situation, "how is it that you have not written to me for more than a

week, and have taken no notice of my last two letters?"

"And is it possible that my brother has not told you?" she answered in a sad, tender tone, as if deeply grieved for the pain she was forced to inflict. "Surely, Mr. Malreward, you know, do you not—why compel me to say it—that all must be at an end between us now?"

"Certainly—I do *not* know it—" Victor came a few steps closer to her, his eyes began to kindle—"and if you do not wish to drive me mad, you will tell me exactly what you mean."

"Oh! will you not spare me? Indeed I do not wish to wound you," and she looked up at him with a soft, shrinking, deprecating look in her beautiful brown eyes. It is strange how much downright callousness and cruelty there often is in those sweet, gentle, clinging feminine creatures—to use George Eliot's comparison, downy peaches, with hearts of stone inside them. Such a woman as Helen Erle will go into ecstasies over a baby—in public; and in private will calmly order the necks to be wrung of a whole nestful of young birds, whose chirpings, too near her bed-room window, had chanced to disturb her morning slumbers.

But Victor looked down upon her fixedly, as if ready to drag the truth out of her; and she went on—"My mother and my brother agree

with me in thinking, that after what has just occurred, there can be no chance of happiness in my contemplated marriage with you. Nor can I now consent to take your name, when that name—you force me to speak too plainly—has been brought before the world as it has been. I beg you to be content with this—do not ask me to say more!”

Victor turned abruptly from her, and walked to the other end of the room. He stood there looking out of window for some minutes, whilst Helen sighed softly once or twice, and pondered how she could end the interview most gracefully. Then at last he came back to her, and confronted her with a face ghastly white, and eyes glowing like hot coals. “You think I murdered my father, do you?” he demanded, in a low, terrible voice.

“Mr. Malreward—” she answered, still with sad composure—“how can you bring yourself to say such a thing? Oh! all I ask is—to let me go—to release me from my engagement, and forget me!”

“You must think I murdered my father!” he repeated, “or what else can you mean? You think this of me, Helen; *you!* You who said you loved me, and were going to be my wife! You think this of *me!*” He paused an instant; it was as if that one thought had stunned him.

"I am not going to defend myself to you, or try to explain anything; it is enough for me that you can find it possible to think it. You have given me my death-blow, pretty nearly. I thought you would have stood by me—if my own sister even had given me up, I never should have dreamed for a single moment that you would. Do you think I should give you up, if the whole world had combined together to slander you? Would I not have held you only the closer for it—you whom I have believed in as never a man believed in a woman more! Oh, Helen! Helen!" and suddenly he wrung his hands together in the agony of the loss which was for Eternity, and not for time alone—the loss of his ideal—"what has become of my Helen whom I loved?"

In answer to this, she took from her pocket a packet neatly done up in white paper. "I think no good can come of our prolonging this most painful interview. There are your letters, Mr. Malreward," and she laid them on the table. "I can rely upon your returning all of mine?" she asked, with more anxiety in her voice than had before appeared during the conversation. Victor replied by a silent inclination of his head. "And here is your ring," and she drew off the valuable, old-fashioned sapphire hoop which he had given her at Oxford.

"As it was my mother's ring," he answered, "I will take it back. Here is yours." He took from his finger the gold posy ring which she had given him, and was about to return it to her, when a sudden thought, perhaps the remembrance of the motto inside it—"Who shall separate us?"—a sudden thought struck him. "No, you shall not have it, to delude another man with!" He dashed it upon the floor, set his foot upon it, and crushed it. "Keep anything else I may have given you, or fling it in the fire, just which you please."

He began gathering up his hat and gloves, with shaking hands, in a mazed, uncertain way, as if he had had a blow in the face, and could hardly see. Helen moved across the room, in order to ring the bell. In passing, her dress lightly touched him. He quivered all over, raised his eyes, and looked her in the face.

Victor looked at her as she stood there, in her pale, proud beauty—his Helen, his love, his wife to be; no, Helen the false, the cruel, the siren who lured men to their destruction; and his unselfish affection, scorned, gave place to a passion she might have had a right to scorn. In a moment he had her in his arms, grasping her so tightly that afterwards she found a purple bruise on her white shoulder; his eyes, bent down upon her, had something of a tiger-like

glare in them ; and with his scorching lips he kissed her, until she felt almost suffocated.

"No !" he said, in a low, hoarse voice—"no, you are not going to escape from me quite so easily as that ! It is not very likely ! You *shall* marry me !—you shall marry me soon too ! I am free now ! I can marry to-morrow !"

Helen could not reach the bell—it was both useless and undignified to scream ; the walls were thick, Mrs. Erle was out, and the servants were all far away. It was as if she were alone in the house with a madman. But she did not lose her presence of mind ; and, still calmly, she answered him, as soon as she had recovered enough breath to speak, "No, Mr. Malreward, I will not marry you."

"You dare to tell me that !" He ground his teeth ; he absolutely shook her. "If you will not marry me, I will be the death of you !"

"And what good will that do you ? I cannot marry you after I am dead."

"Never mind ; no other man shall have you, at all events !" Then, at the fearful look of Victor's face, for one moment Helen's courage failed her ; she turned sick and shut her eyes, and began to believe that her last hour was come.

But as he saw her thus lying in his arms, pale, passive, helpless, Victor relaxed the grasp

which was almost crushing her ; though not sufficiently to let her escape. "My love! my love!" came a burst of passionate tenderness, "do you think I would hurt a hair of your head? Look up!—open your eyes!—sweet eyes—they are the very light of my life to me! Come, kiss me, my own, and tell me that it is all nonsense, and that you love your poor Victor, and will be his wife very soon."

"Mr. Malreward, I will not," came her cool, deliberate answer ; "and if you have one spark of gentlemanly feeling left, you will let me go."

"No, I will not let you go ; you must marry me now, when I have kissed you like this—and this—and you have worn my ring, and every one knows we belong to each other!" cried Victor, ungenerous and unmanly, as the best man may become if a woman drives him too far. He felt mad and wicked enough to wish anything—to wish that some of Helen's fashionable London acquaintances would enter the room, would see her thus, grasped in her lover's arms, with his lips pressed to hers ; that so she might feel herself compromised, and forced by society to continue engaged to him.

Then suddenly realizing that nothing he had said had had the smallest effect in shaking her resolution, "Oh! Helen," he implored, "for God's sake have a little mercy on me! Remember

how I have loved you from the very first time I saw you; only consider how I have thought of you ever since; not a day has passed but what I have prayed on my knees to God that you might be mine. The very best part of me, all my best hopes and feelings have been bound up with you. You were always in my mind when I was reading my hardest at Oxford; when I got my First, it was of you I thought before every one. I wanted to become more worthy of you; I wanted you to help me to be a better man. Helen, don't—*don't* give me up! If you do, you will make a very devil of me! I am nearly that as it is, I think. Oh! Helen, you would not like to think, when you came to die, that I was lost for ever and ever, and all through you?"

"That is between yourself and your Creator. One person cannot be made responsible for another in that manner," answered Helen, a little triumphantly, having reduced her rampant lover into pleading for her mercy. "And I must add, that if anything had been wanting to show me that I have done wisely in breaking off my engagement to you, it would be that violence of temper which you have exhibited to me, and which is only in keeping with what I have heard of it from others."

"Go, then!" cried Victor, with a sudden re-

vulsion of feeling, almost pushing her from him. "False, hard-hearted woman, go, I am well rid of you!" And with that he snatched up his hat, and rushed out of the room.

Five minutes after a fashionably-dressed, fast-looking, middle-aged man drove up to the door in a mail phaeton. He stared at the young man in deep mourning, with haggard face and blood-shot eyes, and unsteady gait, who was coming down the steps of Mrs. Erle's house. "Who the deuce is that fellow, and what does he want at the Erles'? Looks uncommonly as if he had been drinking. And now for my beautiful Helen!" said to himself the occupant of the phaeton, as he alighted. But Victor, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, passed on into the crowd of the London street.

CHAPTER VI.

His sweet sister, of all those
 His friends, the dearest. Hushing signs she made,
 And breathed a sister's sorrow to persuade
 A yielding up, a cradling on her care.

KEATS.

Your brother is a forfeit of the law,
 And you but waste your words.

Measure for Measure.

MR. MALREWARD was buried upon a Saturday. On the Monday morning following, a lumbering, old-fashioned, provincial fly drove up to Malreward Court, and Mrs. Stansfield Erle, in deepest mourning, alighted. "Oh! Mrs. Jennings," she cried, as the housekeeper opened the door, "how is Mr. Victor?"

"Indeed, Miss Freddy—ma'am, I mean—I am afraid he is very ill," answered Mrs. Jennings, with an anxious, troubled look; "and I am *that* thankful you have come to him at last. I made sure you would have been here yesterday—there's been no one to look after him and take care of him but me; but perhaps you have been poorly yourself, ma'am? You look like it, if you'll excuse me."

"Never mind me, Mrs. Jennings." But indeed Freddy was altered; her face was worn and pallid, her eyes were feverishly bright, the lids all reddened—there was something hard and restless about her. "No, I could not come yesterday. It was Sunday. Not that that was the reason, only——" She checked herself suddenly, and compressed her lips together. It was impossible to confess the real cause—that her husband had not been at his office yesterday, and that therefore she could not escape from him. "Where is Mr. Victor? I will go to him at once."

"He is in the library, ma'am, and I hope he will let you come in and see him, I am sure; he won't us. He has been sitting there most ever since he came home from London. I suppose you heard, ma'am, how frightened we all was Saturday night when he came home?"

"No, I have heard nothing—nothing," she repeated, with an almost fierce emphasis, "except that he did go to London." And now, instead of rushing to her brother, as her first impulse had been, Freddy lingered to hear the housekeeper's gossip. It was as if she dreaded to see Victor, and know the worst.

"We was just going to bed, and had quite given Mr. Victor up that night—for you see, ma'am, he said he might stop in London over

Sunday—when there was a knocking and a ringing at the back door, and the porter from the railway station came up to tell us to send down our trap for Mr. Victor to come home in, for they had had to carry him out of the railway carriage, and there he was lying at the station in a dead faint. Well, Jennings he went out and got the horse and trap ready, and him and me and the railway man all rode down to the station together, and I took some smelling salts with me, and a little bottle of brandy, and a warm rug or two to put over Mr. Victor. So when we got into the office, there he was, poor dear young gentleman, laid out upon the bare floor, looking as much like a corpse as ever you would wish to see, and just a coat rolled up and put under his head, and the station-master trying to bring him to with dabbing water on his face; and precious little good that did him, so freezing cold as it was that night. It made me cry almost to see him like that, and to think that he had no mother or wife to look after him, nobody but an old woman like me. And it put me in mind of the time when his poor father, as is gone to his rest, we'll hope, though I can't say as he ever seemed much prepared, and such a shocking end as he made of it too; and nobody knows how he came to it, though I always says as how he was tipsy,

for he was that pretty much of his time."

"Mrs. Jennings, I don't want to hear anything more of Mr. Malreward," interrupted Freddy. "Tell me about my brother."

"Well, as I was saying, ma'am, it did put me in mind of the time when the old Squire pretty nigh starved Mr. Victor to death, because he wouldn't do something he wanted him to do, I could never make out the rights of it; and poor Mr. Deverell, that was the head-keeper, him as went off to America all of a sudden, that they are telling such rum tales about; and there's worse things than that said, ma'am," and Mrs. Jennings grew red and swelled like a turkey-cock, "about poor, dear Mr. Victor himself; and all I know is, if they come saying such things to me, I'll be at them with the kitchen chopper, I will!"

"Well, I will go to Mr. Victor now. Get some soup ready at once, please, if you have it in the house. I shall get him to take it presently, no doubt. And light a fire in the drawing-room." Freddy walked off with a little dignified air; Mrs. Jennings followed her, gabbling as fast as she could. "And so, Miss Freddy, he came to after a bit, and we got him safe home that night; but he wouldn't go to bed, or touch a bit or drop of anything, and nothing we could do would make him; and he is

sitting in the library now all in a heap like a dead thing," and by this time Freddy had entered the room, and had closed the door between herself and the old woman's tongue.

Victor was sitting as Mrs. Jennings had described him—all in a heap, his arms folded on the library table, his head resting upon them, his face hidden. Without saying a word, Freddy knelt down by his side, put her arm round his neck, and laid her head down on his shoulder. She could not speak at first; she could not utter one of the feelings which burned within her. Freddy was a woman in whom the motherly instincts, the desire to protect and cherish, were much stronger than the wifely instincts, the desire to be cherished and protected. In fact, she had always rather resented any man's offer of help and guardianship. But here, with Victor, she felt all the wild rage and anguish and tenderness of a mother whose child had been torn from her and cruelly treated, and whom now, bruised, bleeding, fainting, she clasped to her heart again. "Stansfield and Helen have pretty nearly killed him between them," she thought.

At last Victor raised his head a little, and said in a faint voice, "Why have you come, Freddy?—you can do me no good. You are all alike, you women; false and faithless, every one of you."

Freddy was not surprised at this. She knew that even the best men will, under the pressure of mental or bodily suffering, now and then seek relief by reviling some female relation. She only said, "I am come to help you, darling. It is my place to look after my boy, you know. And now you will have something to eat, just to please me, won't you? Oh, yes," she said, as he shook his head without speaking, "you know, I could not eat in your house if you did not, and I shall not be able to starve all day." And then, as Mrs. Jennings knocked at the door she rose, and from her hands took a tray which contained a plate of soup, and one or two little dainties which the housekeeper had thought might tempt her young master to eat.

"Why should I eat?" said Victor, "I don't want to live."

"Yes, you must live, and take care of yourself, for my sake, and for Uncle Arthur's, and for the sake of everybody who cares for you."

"No one cares for me; yes, you think you do, but you are only a sham like the rest. I don't believe in God or man any more. The world is one great lie; and the sooner I am out of it and come to an end altogether the better," and then he laid his head down on the table again.

Of course Freddy did not stop to argue with him, all her tact and energy were devoted to

getting him to take some food. She succeeded at last, for Victor scarcely seemed to have enough strength left to resist anything; and then she asked him, "Now don't you think you had better go to bed?"

"No; where is the use? I cannot sleep; I have scarcely slept for two nights; I shall never sleep again, I think."

"Then let us come into the drawing-room. Yes; come with me, darling; I don't like this dismal library."

He got up then with a helpless stupefied look. "I only want to be left alone," he sighed. He felt like some wounded animal, whose instinct was to crawl away and die unnoticed.

"Lean on me," Freddy answered, for he was shivering from head to foot; "you are quite stiff and cramped with sitting still so long."

"I don't know what is the matter with me," said Victor, as slowly, with trembling steps, he crossed the room, leaning on his sister's arm. "I feel so weak; my brain and my limbs seem all gone. Am I going to die, I wonder? No, people never die when they want to die."

They went into the drawing-room, which looked gay and cheerful with the bright fire blazing on the hearth, and the noonday sun streaming in through the tall windows, which looked out upon beds of scarlet geraniums, purple petuni-

as, and other gorgeous flowers; on the velvety lawn, and the background of cedars, intensest green by contrast to the gold and flame colour of elms and beeches. Freddy began wheeling the sofa towards the fire, when Victor, with quick, gentlemanlike instinct, aroused himself, and sprang forward to help her. "No," she said, "it is my turn to wait upon you now; don't you remember the devoted slave you were to me last year, when I was a cripple? Now lie down here, and I will cover you up with this rug, and then perhaps when you get warm, you will be able to go to sleep."

Victor lay upon the sofa in that state of stupor when the brain cannot think consecutively, and all the feelings are numbed, and which yet knows nothing of the peacefulness of sleep. For a few minutes, perhaps, he would remain as still as death, without seeming to breathe; then, just when Freddy hoped that he had fallen asleep, he would start, and move his arms restlessly, and mutter to himself a few incoherent words. Freddy sat beside him hour after hour, sometimes arousing him, and, by dint of much coaxing and patient persistence, persuading him to take a little food. She watched the face, which made her heart feel as though it would break, it looked so youthful, and yet so worn and sunken with pain—so boy-

ish, and yet so despairing. There was a sort of piteous, innocent bewilderment about him, as though he did not altogether understand what had happened, and why he was suffering so much; as one may sometimes see in the face of a sick child. And as a mother might watch her child, so Freddy watched him hour after hour throughout that long sad day.

All at once Victor started and cried out, "Helen! Helen!" Freddy bit her lips and clenched her finger nails into her palms. But Victor opened his eyes and said quite calmly—"I could not care for Miss Erle now if she were here, imploring me to do so. She killed my love for her stone-dead and cold, all in one minute. But oh! it is awful to think that there is no Helen at all in the world!—that the Helen who came to this house last year, and was with us at Llandudno, and at Oxford only last term—to think that she never had any existence—she was nothing all the time but a mockery and a sham! She is gone out of the whole universe. If I were to go to heaven when I died, I should not find her there, even." And then his eyelids, heavy for want of sleep, closed again, and for a time he remained as quiet as a corpse.

About an hour afterwards, as Victor was sitting up, languidly eating the few spoonfuls of

soup, which were all that he could force himself to swallow, Freddy said, "I hope Uncle Arthur will be here to-morrow evening."

"Then, if he comes, I will not see him," answered Victor, with a sudden vehemence. "No, he has had enough trouble all his life long from his connection with the accursed race of Malrewards; he shall not have my dishonour to bear. I will have nothing more to do with him from this day forward. People shall not point their fingers at him, and say that his nephew, whom he brought up, narrowly escaped hanging."

"Oh! hush, my darling!—don't talk like that!" cried Freddy, clasping his hand in hers.

"But it is all true, you know," he answered, quite calm again. "Helen thinks that I murdered my father, and I am beginning to believe that I did it."

Freddy said no more, but as soon as Victor had lain down again and shut his eyes, she stole out of the room, went back to the library, and wrote a few hurried lines to her uncle. She told him that terrible things had happened since he had last heard from Malreward Court; that Victor had frankly confessed to her, and had meant to do so to him the first opportunity, all that had come out at the inquest; that, under extreme provocation, he had uttered to his father at their last meeting words which he had

since bitterly repented, and which no one who truly loved him would for one moment remember against him, but which Helen Erle had made a pretext for breaking off her engagement.

"I dare not trust myself to write about Helen,"—so Freddy's letter ran. "I only know that when I look at my brother, I feel as though I could murder her. I think he is very ill. I am more anxious about him than I can say. Dr. Radcliffe was here this morning before I came, and he will be here again to-morrow. Come to him, dear uncle, the first moment you can leave your home. If he ever wanted the help and comfort you can give him, it is now. He says he will not see you; he has brought so much trouble upon you; but do not listen to him, any more than you would listen to a man in delirium; or, as if he were a boy again, use your authority, and stand no nonsense from him, but stay with him even against his will. Anyhow, dearest uncle, please—please come! There," thought Freddy, as she addressed the letter, and gave it to Mrs. Jennings to post, "I know that when the Rector reads that, he will only wish for wings to fly to his boy."

She returned to her place beside Victor. The time passed on; the shadows lengthened; the sun set, with gleams of crimson amidst slate-coloured mists; the yellow trees faded away;

and Freddy remembered that about this hour her husband would be coming home from his office, would find his wife fled—fled to the house which yesterday he had forbidden her to enter again. Until that moment she had forgotten everything but Victor, but now a terror seemed to curdle her blood, and to stir the roots of her hair. What would Stansfield say or do when he found her gone, and merely a note which she had left to tell him that she was nursing her sick brother? Freddy raised her eyes to the portrait which hung opposite to her. The young mother's sad, bright, tender face seemed to look down upon her boy and girl in their forlorn misery—Victor, stunned with the blows which one after another had fallen upon him; Freddy, suffering all his sorrows, and others of her own, which no one could sympathize with, or scarcely venture to pity. "Ah! mother dear," thought the young wife, "the women of our family seem apt to get broken hearts!"

They had had tea together, and there had been another long silence, when Victor raised his head with a bewildered look. "It is getting dark—awfully dark and lonely; just like death. How I dread the nights! Are you still there, Freddy?"

"I am here, dearest; I will not leave you." She rose, stirred the fire, and lighted the mo-

derator lamp which Mrs. Jennings had set upon the table a little while before.

And now the stillness was profound; it was a calm night, not a leaf rustled out of doors, and the house might have been empty for any sound of life that there was in it. Victor had remained quiet for some time past, his hand clasped in his sister's, and his breathing was so soft and regular, that she felt sure that he had fallen asleep, and she thanked God that the troubled, passionate heart was at peace for a little while. Wild, eery thoughts came into Freddy's mind, as she sat, half dozing, also. How strange it was that their terrible and dreaded father should have stealthily returned to the Court the very last night she had stayed there! He had come amidst darkness and mystery, and had disappeared into them again. Supposing he were not really dead and buried after all; supposing he should appear at the Court again to-night, or supposing his spirit should come back from the land of shadows, to tell them how it was that he had died. Oh if they only knew all; if only these foul mists of rumour and suspicion could be cleared away by the bright shining of truth; if only these cowardly hints and inuendoes from those who were afraid to speak out what they meant, could be openly met and fought against; if only some fresh evidence

could start into light, to prove to the whole world how Mr. Malreward had met his death! But whatever the evidence might or might not be, how could anyone treat Victor as Stansfield and Helen had done? The tears rolled down Freddy's cheeks as she gazed at her brother's face; upon which now, as he lay in the "touching helplessness of sleep," something of the placid, guileless smile of a tired child at last at rest was gradually dawning. How could they treat him so—Victor, the dearest brother, the most dutiful son to the Rector, who had adopted him; Victor, with his unselfishness, his loveableness, his consideration for the poor, his tenderness to animals; Victor, who was ever on the side of the weak, the oppressed, the down-trodden; how could Helen, the woman who had been honoured by his love, whom he had wished to make his wife, treat him as she had done? Some lines of Shelley's floated across Freddy's mind:—

"On me, whose heart a stranger's tear might wear,
 As water-drops the sandy fountain stone;
 Who loved and pitied all things, and could moan
 For woes which others heard not, and could see
 The absent with the glass of phantasy,
 And near the poor and trampled sit and weep,
 Following the captive to his dungeon deep.
 That thou on me
 Shouldst rain these plagues of blistering agony,
 Such curses are from lips once eloquent
 With love's too partial praise"

All at once, in the stillness of that evening, as the lamp was growing dim, and Victor still slept on, there was a sound of carriage wheels rolling up to the Court. Freddy started out of the slumber into which she was just falling; she listened, trembling with an awful fear, to the ringing of the door-bell, and to a parley in the hall. Then the drawing-room door opened, closed again, and with quick, firm tread, somebody walked across the room.

Freddy knew who it was, this fair-haired, broad-shouldered, very gentlemanly-looking man, who marched straight up to the fireside. Freddy was a healthy-minded, cultivated woman; she had none of the terrors of horses, cows, robbers, and railway accidents, common amongst the uneducated of her sex; but now, at the presence of her husband, her very heart seemed to stop beating, as though she were brought face to face with death.

Even then her first thought was for Victor. "Stansfield," she implored, in an agonized whisper, "don't speak, don't wake him! He has had no sleep for two days and nights until now."

"Frederica, come home with me," was Stansfield's quiet but relentless answer. He stooped down; he was about to forcibly disengage Freddy's hand from her brother's, which still held it in his sleep, when Victor awoke. In a

sort of panic he sprang up; Freddy threw her arms round him, and clasped him with all her force—but it was for his protection, not her own. Once, many years ago, with her tears and entreaties, and arms thus clinging round her brother, she had saved the boy from summary punishment at the hands of his uncle; but she could not save Victor now, from what Stansfield might choose to do.

“I am sorry to have been forced to intrude upon you, Mr. Malreward,” began his brother-in-law, ceremoniously; “but I want my wife.”

“You shall not have her!” replied Victor, roused into passionate defiance, and standing with his arm round Freddy’s waist. “You have taken my wife from me, you have slandered away my good name, my sister is all I have left, and I will keep her as long as she chooses to stay with me. Now, leave my house, sir, and have the goodness not to enter it again without invitation.”

“Oh! Stansfield! dear Stansfield!” implored the unhappy wife, her terror of what Victor’s words might provoke Stansfield into saying or doing to him, robbed her of all her spirit, “for pity’s sake let me stay with Victor a little while—just a little while! I will be a good wife, I will come home to you in a very few days—indeed I will. You are well and happy

and prosperous, you don't want me as he does. Oh! Stansfield," she shrieked, seeing the inexorable calmness of his face, "have you no mercy at all?"

"I do not wish to enter your house again, certainly, Mr. Malreward," answered Stansfield, looking at Victor, and not noticing Freddy's appeal; "and I will take good care that my wife does not. Now, Frederica, will you come home quietly with me, or will you compel me to use force?"

The brother and sister clung to each other as if they were drowning; but it was in vain. Slightly made, and brought down by grief and want of sleep and long fasting as Victor was now, his bodily strength was no more a match for Stansfield's than a brother's claim is a match for a husband's. There was one moment's desperate struggle, then Stansfield wrenched the brother and sister apart, giving Victor something between a blow and a push, which sent him staggering backwards against the chimney-piece; and unheeding her wild cry, "Victor! oh! my darling Victor!" Stansfield caught his wife up in his arms as if she had been a child, carried her out of the room, across the hall, and put her into his brougham, which stood, with lamps burning, waiting outside.

Mrs. Jennings came running with Freddy's

bonnet and cloak, which Mr. Erle had bidden her to bring. "Oh! Miss Freddy! Miss Freddy!" she cried. "Oh! sir, what's the matter?" Stansfield took the things, thanked her, put half-a-crown into the old woman's hand, said to the coachman, "Home," and sprang into the carriage.

Then, as they drove on, he turned and looked at his wife. She was leaning back in the corner of the brougham, just as he had placed her. Her eyes looked fixed, and stared blankly before her; her white lips were parted, showing her clenched teeth; she looked almost as if she were in a state of catalepsy. When he said, "Here are your things, put them on," she did not move; and with clumsy, but by no means untender hands, he put her bonnet on her head, wrapped her cloak round her shoulders, placed a fur-rug over her knees, and a hot-water tin to her feet. For Stansfield always was very careful about his wife's bodily comfort; and he had not forgotten that night to fill the carriage with little luxuries for her. Having done this, Stansfield folded his arms, shut his eyes, and settled himself comfortably in his corner of the carriage. Not another word was spoken during the long dark drive.

When the brougham, after rattling over the ill-paved, dimly-lighted streets of the country

town of Donnistone, at last drove up the gravel drive and stopped at the door of Arbutus Villa, Stansfield alighted, and held out his hand to his wife. "Now, come, my dear," he said, in an authoritative, yet coaxing tone; but Freddy neither moved nor spoke; and he half-led, half-carried her into the dining-room, where the gas was lighted, and supper laid on the table. There he placed her in an arm-chair by the fire. He brought a glass of wine and held it to her lips. She shook her head then, and drew back a little, and somehow the wine was spilt upon her dress. "Really, Frederica," he said impatiently, as he mopped it up with his handkerchief, "you are behaving just like a child. I shall leave you alone to recover yourself."

At the end of half an hour, Stansfield began to feel rather uneasy. Why would not Freddy speak to him?—why would she persist in sitting there like a sulky statue?—what did she mean by it?—what was she thinking about? "Hang it all!" he thought, "I wish she would say something—I wish she would begin reviling me even, and then I should give her the little lecture that I have in store for her." He could control Freddy's personal liberty, but he began to feel that this did not altogether content him. He had gained little by forcing her to come home with him this evening, if it was an icicle

he had brought, and not a loving wife. He wandered aimlessly about the room, fidgetting with books and newspapers; he wanted to say or do something to provoke her into speaking. He took up one book—he had not read it—there were not many non-professional books that he had read—but its mere title irritated him. "How did this come here?—such rubbish!" he muttered. "Really for the future I shall exercise a little stricter supervision upon the books that enter my house. If you had read your Bible a little more, and John Stuart Mill a little less, you would have been a better woman, Frederica."

At last Stansfield could bear it no longer; he sat down by Freddy's side. "My dear little wife, you must not think that I am harsh or unforgiving to you. If you will only say that you are sorry for what you have done to-day, in defiance of my express wish, and will be guided by me entirely for the future, you may be sure that I shall not think of it again. Come, my pet, let us make it up." He put his arm round her, he was just going to kiss her, when she sprang away, and stood up, confronting him, with blazing eyes and cheeks.

"Oh!" she cried, her chest heaving, "is it not enough that you have nearly broken my heart, but you must make this vile pretence of loving me? And such love as it is too! I

loathe it!—I loathe you! You have taken me away from my brother, my dear, dear brother, who wanted me, who has no one but me left, who is ill, dying, for what you know, and all through you—you and your sister Helen! I curse the day we ever met either of you!”

Stansfield was rather startled, but he answered quite calmly, “My dear, you really do not know what you are saying. You had better go to bed now, and I hope, after a good night’s sleep, you will have come to a better state of mind.”

“Sleep! as if I could sleep! Yes, you try to take care of me, and see that I have plenty to eat, and pretty dresses to wear, and then you think I ought to be satisfied. Satisfied! I tell you I hate this house, I hate all your comfort and prosperity, when I think of my darling all alone and miserable in that gloomy place, without anyone to take care of him, or speak one kind word to him. And to think it is all your doing! You have behaved barbarously to him; you have spread false reports about him—false reports, yes, *lies*, Stansfield!” she cried, seeking for words that would sting him into losing his composure.

He grew a shade paler, but he merely said, “I see one consequence already from your associating with your brother. He has taught

you to use violent and undutiful language to those to whom you owe respect, if nothing else. And now you had better leave the room before you say anything more that you will be very sorry for by-and-by."

"I am thankful to leave you." And she began to move across the room, trembling a good deal, but still with haughty grace. At the door she paused and added, "You treat me like a slave—the shameful indignity you put upon me this evening at my brother's house you may be sure I shall never forget. But I am an independent human being for all that, and I give you fair warning that I shall return to Malreward Court to-morrow."

"Wait one moment," said her husband, and his tone lowered ominously. "Perhaps we had better have this matter settled to-night. Come back to the fire,"—she hesitated a moment, but finally did so—"and now listen to me. Do you remember that not a year ago you, in the most public, solemn manner possible, promised to obey me? Then how can you reconcile it to your conscience thus to openly set me at defiance, as you have done to-day, and as you tell me you mean to do again to-morrow?"

"Oh! Stansfield," she answered, her eyes falling under his, which were sternly fixed upon her, "I am ready to give way to you in little

things, you know I am, but why are you to be always the judge of what is right and what is wrong? I am grown up, I am not ignorant of the world, I have all my senses about me, certainly in most cases I am as capable of deciding wisely as you are."

"Most certainly you are not," replied Stansfield, "and I see more and more clearly how little you know what is your proper position as a woman and as a wife. However, I have not the slightest intention of entering into arguments with you, I simply wish to tell you what I mean to do. I shall forbid the servants, on pain of instant dismissal, to let you have either of the horses or carriages during my absence, and I shall warn all the livery-stable keepers in the town not to supply you with any hired vehicle. I do not suppose you will be so insane as to attempt to walk the distance to Malreward Court; but even that, however, I shall take measures to guard against."

Freddy stood speechless, whilst he observed the marked effect which his words had upon her. At last she cried, "Do you mean—do you actually mean to say you have legal power to do all that?"

"Undoubtedly I have, as I happen to be your husband—a fact which you seem to have entirely forgotten lately."

"Never mind," muttered Freddy, between her set teeth—"never mind, I shall find a way to escape you somehow."

"I don't think you will, while English laws remain what they are now, thank God! If you leave me for any length of time I shall have ample legal remedy; but if you stay at your brother's house even for a single day, then,"—he paused a moment, as if to give effect to the words that followed—"then I will treat Victor Malreward—your darling, as you call him—as I would treat any other man who interfered between me and my wife, and I will give him a horsewhipping he won't easily forget." Stansfield's eyes had an unusual gleam in them; passion had once before led him to throw prudence to the winds, and passion might do it again.

"You dare—you dare to say that!" shrieked Freddy, crimson, choking with indignation.

"I dare to say it, and I dare to do it, too, as you and he will find out next time you go to Malreward Court."

"You coward, you *coward!*" so his wife hurled at him the most opprobrious epithet she could think of. "When you know that you are stronger than he is! Oh, if I were only a man!"

"Yes," replied Stansfield, with a grim satisfaction, "I know that he is a mere boy compared with me. But there is nothing cowardly

in a man's chastising a boy, if the boy deserves it. If he, in return, summons me for an assault—which, I take it, he will hardly venture to do—I shall simply state the whole facts of the case. All the world knows the evidence which came out at the coroner's inquest, and there is not a magistrate on the Bench, who is himself a husband and a father, that will not consider me morally, though not legally, justified in resorting to extreme measures, to protect my wife from all association with the late Mr. Malreward's son. Now you have heard what I intend to do, and what you and your brother may expect in the case of disobedience on your part, and interference on his—and remember that I am a man who always keeps his word!—so let us say no more about it. I hope to-morrow you will have returned to your right mind, and to your duties as my wife." And he turned away as if the conversation were ended.

Freddy said no more. She just clasped her hands together and looked up, but not at him. Then she went slowly out of the room, and crept upstairs, supporting herself with the banisters, for she felt as if all her strength were gone. "I can do no more," she thought. "For his own sake I must not go near Victor again. Oh, my darling! my darling! I only wish that you and I could die together."

She went into the bed-room, which was bright with firelight, and full of white curtains, looking-glasses, dainty china, crimson chairs and sofas. But as she closed the door a shuddering horror came over her. For it was only for a little while that she should be alone, even there. She fell upon her knees, she cried out—"Merciful God ! is there no help, no escape for me anywhere ? Am I to be bound body and soul to him—torn away from my family, all my life long, and I so young ? Is there not one friend, one morsel of happiness that he cannot take away from me ; is there not one spot on earth that I can call my own ?"

"Yes, there is the grave," she thought ; "then, and not till then, shall I be free ; there is no other help for me in Heaven or earth." And she rose, quite calm again in her unutterable despair.

"For the Lord looseth the prisoners, and executeth judgment for the oppressed ; He relieveth the fatherless and the widow—but He cannot help a man's wife."

CHAPTER VII.

If all things then should be—my father's spirit,
 His eye, his voice, his touch surrounding me ;
 The atmosphere and breath of his dead life . . .
 Even tho' dead,
 Does not his spirit live in all that breathe,
 And work for me and mine still the same ruin,
 Scorn, pain, despair ?

SHELLEY.

VICTOR lay in bed in the cupola room the whole of the following day ; for he had at last succumbed to Dr. Radcliffe, who persisted in treating him as a patient suffering from an attack of low fever. He was alone, forsaken by every one, except his doctor, who had always a few kind words to say to him when he came, and his nurse, Mrs. Jennings, who, every hour or so, crept softly into his room, and begged, generally in vain, her young master to take some kind of nourishment. He was alone ; his brother, who had once—years ago—tenderly watched over him during illness, had fled the country for his life ; his betrothed wife had broken her engagement to him ; his sister, who

was ready to die for his sake, had been torn from him by her husband—her husband who believed, and who proclaimed to the world, that Victor Malreward was a parricide. All had forsaken him, and he thought that he was left alone to die.

He was drowsy, yet restless; his head and limbs were racked with pain, his mind was straying and confused; the past and the present seemed all mixed up and tangled together, like the floating, crossing threads of a web. The mere associations of the cupola room harassed him: the tears of agony he had shed here after parting with his uncle; the helpless rage and shame in which he had writhed after suffering his father's sneers and taunts, and, upon two occasions, even his blows. The place was haunted with the dark, weird fancy of the Malreward curse, with struggles with fierce tempers and inclinations, with dread and despair of the future. Some words came wandering through his mind—"I am in misery, and like unto him that is at the point to die. From my youth up Thy terrors have I suffered with a troubled mind. Lover and friend hast Thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darkness."

It was growing dusk; one star looked down through the cupola, like a gentle, compassionate eye, upon the lonely, sick, sorrowful young

man. Just as the church clock had tolled the hour of six, the bed-room door opened, closed again, and a man, with light, firm step, walked across the room to Victor's bedside. There came to the invalid a troubled memory of the Christmas week, nearly four years ago, when he had been a prisoner in this room, and a sudden wild terror that his father had come again, made him start and open his eyes. But it was the good genius, and not the evil genius of his life, who was standing by him.

The subdued light from a shaded lamp fell upon a tall, muscular figure, clad in clerical black, grey hair and whiskers, a strong, keen, kindly face. Victor lay still; it was a pleasant fancy to suppose that his uncle was near; but he knew it was only fancy—a sick man's delusion, and that presently it would melt away.

Then suddenly the tall manly figure bent down over him, and there came a bitter cry—"My boy! my boy! don't you know me?"

"Oh! Uncle Arthur, is that really you?" And with a sense of warmth, and rest, and safety, that was almost rapture, rushing over him, Victor flung his arms round the Rector's neck. "How awfully good of you to come!"

Arthur Byrne, too much moved to speak, kissed his nephew's forehead, sat down by his bedside, and looked at him for a minute in

silence. The remembrance of their last meeting, when Victor had been at Oxford, crowned with bright youthful triumphs, University honour, betrothal to the woman he loved—the remembrance of that, and the meeting with Victor as he was now, made the Rector's eyes fill with tears. He soon controlled himself, however, and said, "How do you feel now?—any better?"

"Oh! I am all right enough, thank you, sir; never mind me." And then, the first excitement of seeing his uncle having past away, Victor sank down in his pillows again, closed his eyes, and seemed to relapse into a stupor. He looked so utterly ill and doleful, that Arthur Byrne felt that he must try and rouse him by giving him some trifles to think about.

"Can I have some dinner, Victor? I am rather hungry after my long journey. And can it be brought up here? I do not wish to leave you."

"My dear uncle, how awfully stupid of me not to think of it! If you would have the goodness to ring the bell—you will find one somewhere about the room, I believe," and he raised himself on his elbow, and looked confusedly around.

"Why, my boy, do you mean that you have no bell within your reach, now that you are

ill?" asked the Rector, distressed at what seemed the utter forlornness—even in small matters—of Victor's situation. "What do you do when you want anything?"

"But I don't want anything—what should I want?" he answered wearily, closing his eyes again.

"I have some directions to give about yourself, now that Radcliffe has constituted me your head-nurse. I met him on my way hither from the station, and he was evidently glad that I had come to look after you."

After a hasty meal, Mr. Byrne talked to his nephew a little about Tregalva, and the small events of his parish. Victor answered briefly, and with an evident effort. Finding him disinclined to talk, and hoping that he might soon fall asleep, the Rector took a book from the pile on the table, and tried to read; but his thoughts were filled with the events of the last few days, of which—from Freddy's letter, from Mrs. Jennings' hints, and from the talk he had had with Dr. Radcliffe on his way from the station—he was now well informed. The most astounding feature in the case seemed to be the part which Helen Erle had acted. The Rector felt personally humiliated. "I don't wonder at a young fellow like Victor being taken in; but that I, a man of my age, should be, by a mere

pretty, artful flirt! I fancied that I had some knowledge of the world, some insight into character.—It is a lesson to me. A bitter end indeed to all Victor's bright young hopes—his boyish infatuation, rather. But I cannot be too thankful that he, at any cost, has been saved from binding himself, irrecoverably, to Helen Erle; from hopeless misery—or worse, from the degradation to his whole nature in being happy and satisfied with her. He has had an ugly wound, but it is one which will heal with time and care. So Miss Helen may be dismissed to the more eligible admirer, whom doubtless she has in the background.”

“But as for Stansfield!”—The “old Adam” rose up very strong within the Rector as he thought of the successful, well-to-do lawyer; and he felt it would be a gratifying and a righteous thing to administer to him chastisement such as Stansfield himself—though Mr. Byrne did not know it—had gloated over, in imagination, as inflicted upon Victor. And so, unconsciously, the Rector avenged his nephew in his thoughts.

“The marriage laws are framed to suit and to form men like Stansfield Erle. His early training must have a good deal to answer for—an only son, brought up amongst a number of uncultivated women, who taught him to con-

sider himself a superior being—the most important member of his family. His public school career afterwards may have had no doubt much to do with making him as honourable and straightforward as he is. But what principle does a man learn at a public school to guide him in his conduct towards the other half of the human race? Poor Freddy!—poor child! I must try to see her as soon as I can. I daresay she is wearing her heart out because she cannot come to her brother. I wonder—just as I wondered about her mother—what will be the end of her married life? Will she be crushed into a slave, with the vices of a slave and of many women—helplessness, deceitfulness, servility, low and petty aims? Or will she be moulded into a wise, strong, noble woman, who bears oppression quietly, but not a moment longer than is unavoidable; who endures it, but never acquiesces in it; and so give and receive that discipline of character which both she and her husband grievously lacked in their early life? There is so much sterling goodness in Stansfield, that I cannot but believe that Providence will by-and-by mercifully give him the thorough humbling which he needs.”

Victor had for some hours past been tossing to and fro, sometimes dozing, sometimes muttering incoherent words, when suddenly he

opened his eyes, looked at his uncle, and said, in a quick, excited voice—"Sir, it is an awful mistake your coming here. It is only because you don't know. When you have heard all about it, you will go away and leave me like the rest of them."

Arthur Byrne put down his book, and took Victor's burning hand in his. "Do you think I should ever forsake you, my boy—my son?" came his low, deep-toned answer.

"I am not your son—I am Mr. Malreward's!" and Victor pulled his hand away, and turned his face from the Rector. "That is what he told me when I met him that night in Southwood; and it is all true—I know it now—I shall never get away from him, dead or alive, in this world or the next. I am his own flesh and blood, as he said to me; and whatever I do, I cannot help his having a hold over me, and growing more and more like him every day. 'Ye are of your father the devil, and the works of your father ye shall do'—don't you know?"

The Rector thought—"It cannot be avoided. Victor must say his say, and have it all out with me, but it shall be for once and for all. Victor," he answered very gently, "remember that whatever you are by nature, God has adopted you, and so have I. You are God's child and mine now."

"Ah! I thought so once," and a wild fear and anguish contorted the young man's face. "I thought I was so safe and happy, nothing could harm me any more. That last Sunday at Tregalva—do you remember?—when Mr. Malreward had sent for me, and he had half killed me at Christmas-time just before, but I did not care; it was at the Communion, you know, and I seemed as though I had seen into heaven for a little while; it was my Confirmation over again, before I came back to all the horrors of this place. And only the other day at Oxford, there was an anthem they sung, 'At Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.' Ah! no, never—never any more for me!" And with a gesture of unutterable despair, he raised his hand, let it fall, then hid his face in the pillow, and lay quite still.

"My boy—my boy, God will never forsake you for one minute, neither will I. I would die sooner; and don't you think that He loves you better than I do? Victor, my own son, I *know* it. Will you not believe me?" and Arthur Byrne's voice choked, but Victor remained quite calm.

"I seem all dead and cold," and he shivered. "I hear you speaking, but I don't feel anything you say. But I must tell you—I cannot have you stay here without knowing—I must tell

you what I said to my father the last time I saw him." And then, with growing excitement, with the fever-flush on his cheeks, and his great grey eyes gleaming, and a strange, wild, passionate beauty about him altogether, Victor repeated the words which after events had burned into his mind. "I was madly sorry afterwards, when I heard that he was dead; but I am not sorry now, not in the least. For it is all true, you know; he was the curse of my life, and he is still. I had no peace from him whilst he was alive, and I have no peace now he is dead either. They all say that I killed him, and I don't know whether I did or not. I only know that I have felt like a devil lately, capable of anything. But they have all gone away and left me—Helen, and Deverell, and Freddy. Freddy stayed till the last, but even she is gone now. And now that you know, you will go too."

"Very well," said the Rector, quite self-possessed again; "now you have told me all about it, and I am not going to listen to a word more upon the subject. It seems useless my saying that I am not going to leave you, so all that I can do, is to show it. Come, now,"—and the Rector put his strong arm round Victor's shoulders, raised him up, and arranged his pillows, so that he was supported in a sitting posture;

"now you are going to have some beef tea, and take your medicine, and then we will settle in for the night. I shall sleep on that sofa."

Victor turned away with a petulant, "Leave me alone, uncle—why do you bother me with things?" but Arthur Byrne's cheerful, authoritative answer, "Now, my dear fellow, you must take it—there is no help for you," overruled Victor's masculine dislike to being considered ill, to broth, medicine, and all the accessories of invalidism. The habit of deference to his uncle in which the boy had been brought up, was still strong within the young man.

That night was a gloomy and disturbed one for both uncle and nephew. Malreward Church clock in mournful tones seemed perpetually tolling the hours; the fire glowed sullenly, the lamp burned dimly; the black night sky, thick with stars, filled the cupola, and gave even the Rector a weird sensation as he lay, half dressed, upon the sofa, looking up into unfathomable depths. Victor was very restless, sleeping at intervals, then sometimes starting with a cry, "Uncle—oh! uncle, save me!" And Arthur Byrne would rise, and go to his bedside, and find him breathing hard, his eyes wide open, with an unconscious upward gaze, a clammy dew upon his forehead. It seemed as though he were struggling inwardly with some dark,

mysterious power. And the Rector would take his hand, and speak to him tender, soothing words. "I am here, close to you, dearest boy." But often his cry would still be, "Uncle—Uncle Arthur!—he is gone—they have all gone away and left me!" and not till the Rector had raised him up in bed, supporting his head upon his breast, stroking his ruffled hair, so that he might feel his uncle near, did Victor seem to become quite conscious; and then, panting, exhausted, but with the expression of horror passed away, he would look at the Rector with grateful eyes, and with something of his old exquisite smile.

The one thought which now possessed Victor's mind was, that he was forsaken—by God and man. Wild fancies haunted Arthur Byrne himself, as he lay between sleeping and waking. Supposing it were true—as Victor seemed to fancy—that the father was allowed to stretch forth shadowy hands from beyond the gulf of Death, to torture the son—supposing his sepulchral voice could whisper in Victor's ear, threats that he would for ever and ever hold his son in his power, by the right of parental authority, by nearness of blood and likeness of nature! Supposing it were true—as old family traditions told—that the Malrewards were, from time to time, from generation to generation,

subject to the possession of the Evil One!

For several days Victor remained in much the same state, sometimes better, sometimes worse, never alarmingly ill, but suffering much from bodily exhaustion and mental depression. Arthur Byrne never went beyond the park, until one day Victor's often expressed longings, "I wish I could see Freddy—I do wish I could see her just once," determined the Rector upon going to Donnistone. "I want to see Stansfield Erle upon a little matter of business," said he. "Can I have Boadicea? I shall not be away long."

"Oh yes," answered Victor, looking at his uncle with sad, dreamy eyes. "And Stansfield will tell you that I murdered my father, you know."

"He had better not!" muttered the Rector.

Arthur Byrne dismounted in the High Street of Donnistone, at the door which bore on a brass plate the names "Messrs George and Stansfield Erle, Solicitors." Getting a boy to hold his horse, he went into the office, where he had to wait for several minutes, stared at by a couple of young clerks, who immediately that the Rector's eyes chanced to wander in their direction, bent over their desks, and began to write for their very lives. There was something in the look of this country parson, or Rural Dean, as

they guessed him to be,—Arthur Byrne's Anglican and equestrian propensities showed themselves in his dress, the black broad-brimmed felt hat, long coat, mere morsel of white at his throat, splashed leather gaiters, and riding-whip in his hand,—there was something in the Rector's very look, a look which he was quite unconscious of having, which checked alike dawdling and impertinence. At last the client with whom Mr. Erle had been engaged came out of the inner room, and Mr. Byrne was shown into the lawyer's presence.

Here in his sanctum, which, in all its appointments, was at once business-like and luxurious, Stansfield wore his most professional look, bland, wary, impenetrable. He was surprised at the entrance of Mr. Byrne, and felt sure that the interview would not be too pleasant; but his expression was only a gently enquiring one, as he shook hands with his wife's uncle, and begged him to be seated. There was a great contrast between the two men. The Rector, grey, sinewy, very athletic looking, with keen, severe features, and mind and soul beaming out of his deep-set eyes, and a fine air of distinction about him altogether; a grand old man—or rather, considering that he was still full of buoyancy and vigour, a man in late middle life, like a glowing September

day, The lawyer, in the prime of youthful maturity, fair haired, comfortable-looking, inclined to grow stout, with pale, cold, yet very honest and straightforward-looking blue eyes, with a pleasant suavity about him, and yet a hard, set look also, as if his deference were but surface polish, and his opinions and resolutions were but seldom modified by those of other people.

"I ought to apologise, Mr. Erle, for seeking you in your office, but just now my time, like yours, is not my own. I cannot leave my nephew in the evenings, for he is then always at his worst. However, I will not detain you a minute," the Rector went on; for Stansfield, while still keeping his eyes courteously fixed upon his visitor, began fidgetting with some papers which lay upon the table—"I came merely to tell you that Victor is most anxious to see his sister. We all know that the wishes of a sick person should be gratified as far as possible, and in Victor's case it is particularly important that his mind should be kept quiet. I should therefore be very glad if Freddy would drive over to Malreward Court this afternoon, or to-morrow morning."

The Rector would not put his request in any more deferential words. He felt humiliated by having to make it at all. "To be obliged to

ask this man's leave, as if she were a child, before my niece can visit her sick brother, it is preposterous!"

There was a pause—Mr. Byrne hastily went on, "It is possible that you may fear Victor's illness to be of an infectious nature—that is not the case, I can assure you—it is a touch of low fever, very trying and depressing, but not alarming—that is, not at present;" and then, despite his pride, Arthur Byrne looked at Stansfield anxiously, even imploringly.

The lawyer answered in his calm, pleasant voice, "I trust, Mr. Byrne, that you may soon be relieved from all anxiety with regard to your nephew's health. But, you see, I must consider my wife's health also, and she is by no means strong enough to undertake the fatigue and responsibility of being a sick nurse."

"The fatigue and responsibility of nursing my adopted son are my own privileges, which I do not ask your wife to share with me," replied the Rector, in a proud, sad tone. "All I ask is that Freddy will sit an hour or two by her brother's side during the day, to talk to him when he is well enough to bear it, to soothe him by her presence when he is not."

Stansfield said, with a gentle, deprecating smile, which brought out in him a certain family likeness to his sister Helen, "Even in that case,

I fear I can make no other answer. For my wife's own sake I must guard her from the anxiety and distress of mind which she would necessarily suffer by visiting Malreward Court at present. And now, Mr. Byrne, is there anything which it is possible for me to do for you?" And Stansfield again fingered his papers—even dipped his pen into the inkstand.

"Thank you, I have no request to make to you but this very simple one," Mr. Byrne answered stiffly. "Am I to understand, therefore, that you absolutely forbid Freddy to go to her brother, her only brother, although he is ill, helpless, and is longing to see her, asking for her almost every hour of the day? Why, it is a request I should have thought you would hardly have refused to a sick pauper."

"Perhaps not. But—although in this case you have stated the facts in an unnecessarily harsh manner—you understand me aright. I do absolutely forbid my wife to go to Malreward Court."

"Well, Victor perhaps, may be nothing to you, but do you not care that your wife is suffering deep distress because she is separated from her brother, at a time when he needs all the tenderness and sympathy which those to whom he is very dear can give him?"

"I must be excused from discussing Mrs.

Erle's feelings or my own." And Stansfield suddenly unlocked a drawer in the writing-table at which he was sitting, and thrust some papers therein. It was the only time throughout the interview at which he showed anything like irritation.

"What is your real reason for refusing my request?" abruptly demanded the Rector, his voice lowering in a manner which betokened intense passion.

A slight look of amusement crossed Stansfield's face. He was thinking, "How like a parson to ask me—a lawyer—such a question as that!" He said—"Pardon me, I have already given you a reason. You do not mean to imply, I am sure, that I have not spoken the truth. And does it not strike you that this is hardly the place"—and again he played with his pen—"for the discussion of a purely domestic matter?"

"I fear I could not have expressed myself clearly, when I said that I found it impossible to call upon you in the evening at your own house."

"Perhaps the same objection would apply to the discussion there. For I cannot recognise the possibility of any time or place being suitable to the calling in question by a third party of a matter which is entirely between a husband and wife."

Arthur Byrne rose with compressed lips, and

a haughty air, and took up from the table his hat and riding-whip, not without secretly feeling how pleasant it would be to use the latter across Stansfield's broad shoulders. "Well, Mr. Erle, I suppose that nothing I can say will shake your resolution?"

Stansfield bowed.

"I can only remind you that it is possible that you, some day, may be sick and suffering, but I trust that you may then find from others that kindness and consideration which you now deny my nephew." And all at once the Rector's voice trembled; but, after a momentary pause, he went on, fixing his eyes upon the lawyer with a stern and steadfast gaze, "I am now, Mr. Erle, going to your house to see my niece."

Stansfield's first impulse was to forbid him to do anything of the kind; but he reflected that this aristocratic-looking Rector and Prebendary was useful, to show to the little world of Donni-stone as a relation of his wife's, and counter-balance to the disreputable Malrewards. He answered blandly—"When I answer that I shall have pleasure in seeing you at my house at any time, it is partly because I rely upon your not using your influence with Frederica to induce her to set at naught my wishes."

The Rector bowed. "Thank you, Mr. Erle. No, I do not think my worst enemy has ever yet

accused me of seeking to sow discord between husband and wife."

"And I hope that you," Stansfield proceeded, as he crossed the room to open the door for the Rector—"that you, as a minister of the Gospel, and one who has been a married man himself, will try to impress upon Frederica's mind that trustfulness, self-sacrifice, and obedience are some of the noblest qualities of woman."

"I set so high a value upon those qualities, that I do not wish, as you do, to see them confined to one half of the human race. In the one-sided manner in which they are generally exercised, I look upon them as amongst the most demoralizing influences possible in domestic life. Good morning, Mr. Erle."

The Rector rode up the street towards the suburban Arbutus Villa, feeling very sad, baffled, and wrathful. It seemed as though he were fated never to come to Malreward Court without enduring defeat and humiliation. It was not the first time that he had found his appeals to justice and generosity, weapons of straw against the hard strength of legal authority. But the soldiers of Right against Might can afford to be beaten again and again, knowing that in the end their victory is sure.

"I am powerless to help either of my children," thought the Rector, sorrowfully. "I can-

not protect Freddy, as I protected her mother, who fled to me from her drunken, dissolute husband. When there are cruelty or crime, from parents towards children, from husbands towards wives, courts of law may be invoked; but what power in Heaven or earth can help a woman who is bound for life, merely to a self-willed, self-righteous fellow, who, in the most respectable manner, tortures her for the sake of her supposed welfare, and, I may add, his own selfish passions? Stansfield believes Victor to be Devereil's accomplice; but, like many another man, his beliefs are the fruits of his wishes."

Just for one moment, when Arthur Byrne had spoken of Freddy's distress at being parted from her brother, a quite unconscious vindictiveness had burst through the lawyer's bland look and manner, which had strengthened the Rector's suspicion that Stansfield hated the man to whom his wife was bound by one of the sweetest and holiest of ties, with a jealousy as rancorous as ever a husband hated a lover. What Stansfield would have felt if his wife had been a flirt, it is needless to speculate. He simply would never have married a woman of that nature. It was because a guilty attachment to another man had no possibilities for Freddy, because sisterly affection had so powerful a

hold over her, that Stansfield felt ready to pray for an opportunity of inflicting some cruel indignity upon the only man in the world who had the power of becoming his rival in his wife's affections; and that he felt a secret satisfaction in believing, that if Victor did not with his own hands slay his father, he was, at all events, an accessory to Deverell's crime.

Freddy was seated in her drawing-room, amidst all her pretty knick-nacks and choice works of art—her husband's gifts. Sometimes she read a few pages of the book she held in her hand; sometimes she brooded over the fire. "Ah," thought she, in one of her fits of gloomy musing, "if girls did but know what married life really was, instead of looking at it through the glamour and haze of sentiment, which it is to men's interests to keep before their eyes, how many of them would marry, I wonder?"

There were footsteps on the garden path; a knock at the front door. Freddy gave an impatient exclamation. But it was none of her usual visitors—wives who talked of babies and servants; maidens who talked of dress and admirers. She sprang up with a little ecstatic cry when the Rector entered; and as he bent down his compassionate, care-worn face—for the troubles of his children weighed heavily upon his mind—she threw her arms round his neck

and kissed him. "Oh, uncle—if I could only tell you how glad I am to see you! And how is our darling boy to-day?"

"About the same as when I last wrote to you;" for the Rector had, by daily bulletins, kept Freddy informed of Victor's state. "Still I think we may hope his general tendency is towards improvement." They talked of Victor for some time; then Mr. Byrne said, "Now tell me all about yourself, dear child. I have scarcely seen you since you have been married. For in Oxford, you remember, all seemed hurry and bustle, and people coming and going."

"Oh, uncle!" cried Freddy, "don't talk about Oxford! How happy Victor was there; will you ever forget it? What Helen has to answer for—wretched woman! Does he ever speak of her?"

"Sometimes I have fancied he was thinking of her. I have seen him look at his hand, and say to himself—'Where is my ring?' and then flush and shiver as if he were in pain. But I will not talk about it, my dear," he added, kindly, for the tears were running down Freddy's face, "it is only giving you needless distress." He would not tell her how Victor had sometimes—as if half-delirious—raved about Helen, in a manner at once touching and terrible to witness.

"Go on, please, uncle; I want to hear all that I can about him, now that I cannot see him—I cannot see him—" she sobbed.

"You must remember that whatever he may suffer now, it is nothing compared to what his fate would have been if he had married Helen. He will get over it—he has youth on his side, and a clear conscience, for whatever he may fancy, in his present morbid state of mind and feeling, he has repented the angry words he uttered to his father, and has suffered for them, enough to atone for a far worse offence than any that he has committed. There are not many people who have been punished for a fit of passion, so severely as he has been. Perhaps Providence has determined to cure, for once and for all, what is undoubtedly Victor's chief fault," and the Rector sighed.

The Rector was the last person in the world whom Freddy wished to know that her married life was not altogether happy. Yet the very remembrance that it was he who had warned her of her folly in binding herself for life to a man utterly unsuited to her—perhaps the curious instinctive desire of confession to a priest, which most people feel at least once during their life-time—made her presently burst out vehemently—"I have been punished, too! If I had only listened to you, Uncle Arthur, I should

have been free now, and able to be with my dear Victor whenever he wanted me !”

“This is the end of a so-called love-match,” thought the Rector ; “this is what comes from marrying from passion. I only wish that all the young people who persist in marrying, despite what they call the cold-blooded calculations of their elders, could take warning by her.”

But Arthur Byrne was the last man to use the “I told you so !” style of argument. He answered—“Well, my child, it is useless to think of the past. What you now have to do is to wait, to endure patiently, and to have faith that Victor will be cleared some day, and that you and he will be restored to each other. Whatevèr the world may say—“the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down ; for the Lord upholdeth him with His hand.”

“Oh uncle, you always help me ; when I am away from you, it does me good even to think of you.”

“And then, with regard to any trials of your own which you may have—I have the same lesson to give you, patient endurance. But by endurance, I mean a noble, vigorous quality, which is as much active as passive ; not that abject sitting down and folding of the hands, which is commonly dignified by the name of resigna-

tion, and which, I think, does far more harm in the world than discontent. Many trials which people believe were sent to them to bear, were, on the contrary, intended to stir them up to work. As an old divine says—men often complain of the severity of God's dispensations, when they are not God's at all, but the dispensations of their own folly and idleness. So, my maxim would be—bear no evil whatever, until you have proved, by using every means in your power to remove it, and using them in vain, that you were meant to bear it. Therefore, my dear, whilst submitting—which is not agreeing to—the separation from your brother; remember that Heaven helps those who help themselves; be watchful, energetic, full of tact, neglect no opportunity of influencing your husband's sense of justice and generosity, and of placing before him every little fact which may tell in Victor's favour."

"I have felt so utterly weak and hopeless lately, as though both God and man were against me. There are such dreadful things in the Bible about husbands and wives," and Freddy shuddered.

"I verily believe," said Arthur Byrne, a little impatiently, "that there has never been yet an oppression, or an abuse, which people did not seek to justify by the words of the Holy

Scriptures. It is the old story of 'the letter killeth, the spirit giveth life.' Where would England be now if the seventeenth century Liberals had followed St. Paul's command of non-resistance to the higher powers? There is one great principle which over-rides all rules given for especial times, for a special state of society, and it is this, 'Do unto others as you would they should do unto you.' Looked at from that point of view, the Bible becomes one of the most revolutionary forces of the world."

"Well," the Rector went on, "to return to yourself. I am not far wrong, I fancy, in supposing that you find your life rather dull now and then; that time hangs heavily on your hands?"

"Dull!" cried Freddy; "dull is no word for it. I have nothing to do except pay calls, write a few notes sometimes, and spend five minutes every morning in ordering the dinner. Stansfield does not wish me to visit the poor—he says that is the vocation of old maids, and not of married women; so I fear that it is of no use to recommend me to take a district," she said, with a cheerful despair. For she found by experience that whenever a woman asks for work, aims, interests in life, district visiting—no matter what are her tastes, talents, temperament—is invariably recommended to her as food to satisfy all cravings, medicine to heal all woes.

"You know, Freddy, I am not one of those people who think that women ought to have no other alternative than to be wives or Sisters of Charity. My creed is that women have as widely different vocations in life as men, and an equal right to follow them, without legal or social hindrance. At the same time, I greatly blame many of you women, for talking about your wrongs, instead of quietly setting to work to right them. You, Freddy, and thousands of your sex, have a precious gift in your possession that many a man sighs after in vain; and that is, leisure. The whole world of books lies open before you, as it does before men; but how much time, I wonder, do any of you spend in regular and systematic study?"

Freddy looked down. "I have read a great deal lately; but the thought often comes across me—what is the good of it all?"

"And supposing Victor had said that when he was reading for Moderations? I wonder—" and the Rector smiled—"how often he will open a classical author after he has left Oxford? No, as some one well says, 'Our intellects are given to us to be tools, rather than as store-houses; and it is not the number of sciences or of languages that we are acquainted with, which is the great value of a liberal education, but the breadth and catholicity of our minds,

the accuracy of our vision, the elevated tone of the ideas which we gain from it.' And is it not in these very qualities that ordinary uncultivated women are to be found wanting? You were rather an idle little girl, you know, Mrs. Freddy. But it is never too late to learn; and you are even now only at the age at which men go through the higher part of their education."

The Rector went on to speak of various books which he recommended her to read; and to tell her what pleasure it would give him if she would correspond with him regularly about her studies, her thoughts, her feelings—anything that she was interested in would interest him, said he. "You will not feel then quite so deprived of all intellectual sympathy, will you? as you say that you are now. I have no longer my boy to educate—that is being done for me," said Arthur Byrne, a little sadly—the words had a deeper meaning than appeared upon the surface—"so I have leisure and inclination to become your tutor, if it so pleases you, my dear."

Freddy thanked him warmly; the light came back to her eyes, and the colour to her cheeks, at the mere prospect of having a fresh aim and interest in life.

"Remember, my child," said Arthur Byrne, as he rose to leave her, "every woman who

orders her life by the law of God, rather than by the rules of society, who can see and reverence truth wherever it is to be found, and who fears nothing but sin; who seeks to influence men through their higher, not through their lower natures, and who would rather sympathise with them in noble thoughts than be loved by them through ignoble passions—every woman who does this, helps forward the cause of her whole sex, which is the cause of the human race. ‘The truth shall make you free.’ Physical force may seem to govern; but in the long run it is moral and intellectual culture which wins the day and rules the world.”

CHAPTER VIII.

It is this guilty hand !
 And there rises ever a passionate cry
 From underneath, in the darkening land,
 What is it that has been done ?

TENNYSON.

IN about a week's time, thanks to Arthur Byrne's care and nursing, Victor came downstairs again ; and sometimes, on sunny afternoons, he would, leaning on his uncle's arm, saunter up and down the terrace. He was still very weak in body, very depressed in mind ; he passed hours in silence and inaction. Sometimes the Rector would read aloud, but the effort to listen seemed almost too much for him ; and after a while, with a weary, irritable air, he would beg his uncle to desist.

Once the Rector said to him, "My dear boy, you must remember you are now Lord of the Manor, and that there are hundreds of matters about the estate wanting your attention and supervision. Could we not talk over your future plans a little together ?"

"Future !" repeated Victor. "I have no

future. Everything, as far as I am concerned, has come to an end." He closed his eyes; his look of utter dejection, as though he were capable of forming only one wish, one hope, that he might remain thus, in the place which he occupied day after day, on the sofa by the library fire, undisturbed, unnoticed, till he died; the helpless droop of his head, of his thin white hands—all seemed to speak the words: "My days are past; my purposes are cut off; even the thoughts of my heart." "It seems," he added presently, "as though a great black wall had been built up all around me, shutting me off from everything and everybody I cared for."

The Rector silently laid his hand upon his nephew's shoulder, and Victor turned his head a little, and pressed his lips against that hand. "Yes, I have you still, Uncle Arthur; it is you who keep me alive, I think."

Several times lately the Rector had tried to induce his nephew to let him drive him round the estate. "I want Victor," thought Arthur Byrne, "to turn his attention towards the amount of work which has to be done before the Manor will be in a respectable condition; and then, having supplied him with some food for his thoughts, I will persuade him to come down with me to Tregalva for change of air and scene, before he goes up to Oxford again."

But Victor had hitherto refused to go beyond the grounds, until one afternoon, the Rector, keen to discern between bodily incapacity and mental disinclination to return to the work of life—one afternoon, still and sunny, although it was the month of November, the Rector went to the stables, and ordered the dog-cart to be got ready at once. Then he entered the library, where Victor was, as usual, lying upon the sofa, lost in his own melancholy thoughts. "Victor," said Mr. Byrne, "you and I are going for a short drive together this beautiful day."

"Are we, sir? I think not," and Victor closed his eyes, as if to avoid further discussion.

"Come, my dear fellow; the dog-cart is at the door. You said I might order it, you know. Let me help you on with your great-coat."

Victor opened his eyes again, as if annoyed. But there was something in the Rector's cheerful and determined look, as he stood over him, with the coat in his hand, which made him rise, and presently submit to be helped into the dog-cart, and be driven by his uncle a few miles into the country. He was very tired when he returned, but he slept well that night, and next morning declared, with a smile, that he had returned to the days of his childhood, when his Reverence knew what was best for him. Every day, therefore, the Rector drove him out for an

hour or two, at first through the most sequestered lanes and by-roads in the district. There was a reason for this, as afterwards appeared.

Before long, Arthur Byrne thought Victor quite well enough to give his mind a little to his estate ; and so, one afternoon, he drove him towards the Malreward village. It was one of those silent, lovely, pathetic days of late autumn, when the world seems to lie, with a smile on its face, in a dream between sleeping and waking—between the stir and growth of the summer, and the long death-like slumber of winter. The sky was blue ; soft, mottled, pearly-grey ridges of cloud here and there were streaking it. The woods were like the lurid embers of a vast conflagration ; a few bright points of scarlet and gold twinkled against the sunlight with a jewelled lustre ; beech-trees stood in a mist of warm red brown ; larches were transparent tongues of flame. The purple-brown, almost bare hedges, were speckled with yellow leaves, which hung separately, so that one could have counted them ; a crimson berry or two glistened ; long brambles trailed their belated green ; feathery clematis flecked the boughs as if with foam. The air was filled with sounds, gentle and subdued, in harmony with the placid, dying beauty of the year ; far off rooks cawing, the hum of flies, the plaintive

calls and chirps and whirring wings of little birds—all tiny, tender, dainty sounds. But to Victor's morbid fancy, nature seemed tinged with sadness: The crisp brown leaves strewn everywhere, sailing through the air, heaped on the paths, the waning trees, all spoke to him of ruin and decay. Like theirs, his glory had passed away with the summer.

By and by Victor's attention was drawn to more prosaic matters. They were passing one of the Malreward farms. "Just see," he pointed out to his uncle, "in what a disgraceful state those outbuildings are! Things are like that all over the place. I don't believe you would find anywhere a barn, or fence, or gate in a decent state of repair. It looks as though my father had never spent a penny upon the estate. There is an immense amount of work to be done here, I see that."

"I should like to go round the estate with you some day."

"Oh! I cannot be bothered with it!" and Victor leaned back languidly, and shut his eyes. "I shall put everything in the hands of a land-agent."

Presently they were driving past the row of miserable hovels which were called the village, and Victor became animated again. "Is it not a scandal to the country that the law allows

such a state of things to exist at the will of any landlord? As Freddy says, we want a dose of Prussian government here. Now this shall be seen to at once. I will write to an architect to-night, and we might drive round presently to the spot which, from the time when I was a boy of sixteen, I fixed upon as the site for a new village, on much higher and more open ground than this. How often, in those days, I used to worry myself about the state of these cottages! It shall never be said of me that when I had gained the power, I lost the will," and Victor looked brighter than he had done for weeks past.

The women came to their doors as the young Squire drove slowly along, and ragged and miserable as most of them looked, they curtsied and smiled with beaming faces. Victor asked his uncle to pull up; and then to them, and to some of the labourers who were just then coming home from work, he spoke in his frank, gentle, courteous manner, a manner which, from the young Lord of the Manor to his "vassals," struck the Rector as being little short of perfection. Something in Victor's youthful training had peculiarly fitted him for the post to which he was called at an early age—that of master and landlord. For, as Sir Philip Sidney was taught by his father in one of the most noble and beauti-

ful letters that was ever written to a boy, "Unless you frame yourself to obey others, yea, and feel within yourself what obedience is, you shall never be able to teach others how to obey you."

Many stolid, careworn faces lighted up when Victor spoke; many uncouth, drawling voices expressed, in "Zummerzet" dialect, gladness at seeing the young Squire out of doors again. "Hope you're better, zur; you've been main bad, we've a-heerd," said they. Almost any man who succeeded the cursing, drinking old Squire would have been popular; but Victor, whom they had known as a gentle boy, liberal with pocket-money and kind words, was regarded by the villagers with what as much resembled adoration, as their bodily and mentally half-starved bucolic natures could feel. They had a dim hope that, now Mr. Victor was Squire, the good time was coming at last—that wages would rise and bread would fall; they should have a little more potato-ground, and a little less fever and "rheumatics."

Said Arthur Byrne, as they at last drove off, "Your people evidently look upon you as a sort of righteous king raised up for them, to 'execute judgment for the oppressed.' You have before you almost boundless possibilities of doing good. It is a splendid position for a young man of one and twenty."

"It is," replied Victor, a good deal moved and excited.

But the young Squire had by no means recovered his strength, and the alternate flush and pallor on his cheeks, and the feverish brightness in his eyes, warned his uncle that it was time to go home. As they were driving up to the park gates they met an open barouche, containing two ladies and a gentleman, belonging to one of the county families at whose house Victor had often visited during the last year or two. Of course he bowed and took off his hat. Whereupon the ladies instantly turned their heads away, as though he had insulted them; and the gentleman stared him straight in the face, with a look that would have been indignant, were it not too supercilious.

Victor, astounded, turned to his uncle, as if for explanation. The Rector looked sad, stern, downcast, anything rather than surprised. Then for the first time Victor fully realized his position. The blood scorched his cheeks, forehead—rushed back upon his heart, so that he felt suffocated. "I have Stansfield Erle to thank for this," he said, in a low, hoarse tone; and then he leant back, folded his arms, and said no more, but his eyes looked as though he cursed his brother-in-law.

Scarcely a word did Victor speak, scarcely a

mouthful did he eat throughout dinner-time that evening. The Rector tried to lead his thoughts back to his plans about the estate. Victor, whose face wore a dark, fierce, set look, which brought out in him a strong resemblance to Mark Deverell, simply made no answer. Arthur Byrne grew very unhappy. "I wish I could have got him away before this had happened, but he was so disinclined to go to Tregalva. He must have realized his situation before long, of course, but he is not strong enough to bear it yet, poor boy!"

Later in the evening, as the Rector was writing letters, and Victor was, as usual, brooding over the fire, the young man suddenly exclaimed—"You said to-day, sir, that my position here was a splendid one. Were you not then aware that I was an object of horror and detestation to everyone who knows me?"

Arthur Byrne laid down his pen, and came to the fireside, where he stood leaning against the chimney-piece, looking down very tenderly and thoughtfully upon his nephew. "My dear boy," he said, after a pause, "I knew that you were unjustly accused by some who were strangers to you, or mere acquaintances. But falsehoods do not alter the truth, and the truth is that you have, as I said, grand opportunities of raising, in every way, the condition of the people on

your estate ; and that everyone who knows you thoroughly, cares for you, and would do his utmost to serve you."

"And what is anyone's love to me when my good name is gone, when the world can say—— It is too horrible, too ghastly for me to *think* what they coolly and openly say I am! For, after all, he *was* my father. I used to fancy sometimes that he was fond of me, in a sort of way ; he was rather kind to me now and then, poor old man ! And they think I murdered him ! What harm have I done any living being ? Have I ever wantonly taken the life of an animal even ? What have I done that I should have to bear this ?"

"But I will not bear it !" and Victor started up, and began walking about the room with quick, unsteady steps, and a passionate glitter in his eyes. "Yes, you think, Uncle Arthur, that I am to sit down and fold my hands and tamely submit to being called a vile monster, who, if there were any justice in the world, would have been swinging on the gallows by this time ! Good God ! is it not awful ?—is it not incredible ?" and he stood still, and stared wildly at the Rector, "to think that there is any human being who can believe this of me ?"

"I am the last man in the world to recommend you to tamely submit——"

"No, sir," interrupted Victor, "I will not submit to it! I will not submit to these stabs in the dark; if they were worth the name of men, they would come and accuse me openly. I will give myself up to the police—I will demand a fair trial!"

"You have had that already, remember, at the coroner's inquest. I must say it, my dear boy, a fresh trial, if it were possible, could put you in no better position than you are in at present."

"Then I will go out to America—I will set all their detectives to work—I will find Deverell, and I will make him give me a written confession that he is the criminal, if I have to hold a pistol to his head to make him do it!"

"Still I must remind you," said Arthur Byrne, who felt that this was no time for soothing words, but that he must firmly and clearly set before his nephew the stern facts of his situation, "that a confession from Deverell, extorted by yourself, would be, as things are now, powerless to set you right in public opinion."

"Then, what am I to do?" and suddenly a helpless rage and bewilderment, like that of a wild animal finding itself ensnared, came over the young man—"what am I to do?—tell me, uncle, if you don't want me to go mad?" and he went up to the Rector, and took him by the

arm, and gazed into his face with frantic, imploring eyes, as though he were his only hope and refuge in the universe.

“My boy—my boy!” and for a moment Arthur Byrne, feeling how little power he had to help the being he loved best in the world, almost broke down. Then he said, calmly and solemnly, “Do the work to which Providence has called you—the work of elevating your people and improving your estate; think of the slander of the world simply as something which has to be lived down, something which has been sent to stir you up to still greater energy in doing your duty; and trust in God.”

“Trust in God!—is that all?” With an awful smile, Victor dropped down into a chair. He was silent for some time; then he went on, in a low-toned, impassioned voice, “Have I not trusted in God?—have I not struggled all my life long with the devils that are always about me and within me?—and this is the end of it! If God had ever cared for me, if there were any justice in Heaven or earth, do you think He would have let me come to this? No; whatever I do, I get credit with the world for being a Malreward; and I might as well let things take their natural course for the future. I am worn out with struggling against fate.”

“And so, having fought manfully throughout

your boyish days, you mean to forfeit the rights and privileges of your manhood, and become the slave of circumstances?"

"We are all that, more or less. Circumstances have led you one way, and have led me another. Our lives must necessarily be very different. For your own sake, Uncle Arthur, you and I must have as little to do with each other for the future as possible. I will not drag you down with me in my disgrace."

"Whatever you do, wherever you go, I will not forsake you," replied Arthur Byrne, in a voice stern from extreme emotion. "No one can disgrace you—you can only disgrace yourself; and if you did that, even, I would not forsake you. You cannot escape from God's love and care, and, God helping me, you shall not escape from mine either."

Victor made no answer. Presently he put up his hand to his forehead with a bewildered look. "My brain seems all on fire!" he muttered.

"Come, my dear fellow, let me help you upstairs to bed. You are quite tired out. Come along." Victor was too weary to make any opposition; and the Rector did not leave him until, after taking a sedative, he seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Then Mr. Byrne went noiselessly out of the room, returned to the library, put away his

letters, and sat for a long time thinking about his nephew, and how best he could deal with him. For he knew that Victor had now come to the third great crisis of his life—the former ones having been, when he first came to live at Malreward Court, and when he first went to Oxford. This was the third time that, in an especial manner, he was called upon to make the tremendous choice between good and evil, between following principle and impulse, between drifting with a strong current, or manfully struggling against it. “I should feel less anxiety about him,” thought the Rector, “if he were in his ordinary health. But he is in such a morbid state at present, that he is scarcely responsible for his actions. Perhaps, however, if reason and conscience have less influence over him than usual, my mere authority has more, and I must use it sternly, if required.”

Since his illness, Victor had not yet come down to breakfast; but the following morning, before his uncle had finished his solitary meal, he walked into the dining room. His face was extremely pale; two red spots burned on his cheeks; his beautiful eyes had an evil glitter in them; he looked as if he had been drinking, but such was not the case. He had on his great-coat, and his hat was in his hand. The Rector gazed at him gravely; he saw at once that

Victor had taken some desperate resolution.

"I have made up my mind," said the young man, in a quick, excited tone. "I am going away. I shall write to some land-agent to look after the place, and settle everything for me; I cannot remember the name of anyone at present; never mind, there is no hurry about that—but I am off by the next train, to Paris, I think; I don't much care where, so long as it is out of England."

The Rector became seriously alarmed. At that moment he saw through the window the dog-cart brought round to the front door, and Jennings placing a portmanteau in it. "There is no time to be lost," he thought; "but what is the use of arguing with a man half out of his senses? Very well, Victor, I will go with you; you are not well enough yet to undertake a long journey alone. Could you not go by a later train, or put it off until to-morrow? It would be more convenient to me."

"I will have no one with me; I will have nothing more to do with anyone in England. Do you think I am going to stay here, in this damned place, which I have hated ever since I have known it, and submit to be slandered, and sent to Coventry, when I can go abroad, and live a free, jolly life, away from everyone who has known me here? I have plenty of money,

now ; the estate is mine, I can do what I like with it. So I am come to bid you good-bye, uncle ; it is the best thing I can do for you ; you will be free from the Malrewards henceforward."

"No, Victor," replied his uncle, firmly, "I shall not be free from you, nor will you be free from me. Now sit down, and have a cup of coffee, and let us talk the matter over quietly," said he, knowing the vital importance of gaining time. "You say you have plenty of money, but are you sure that it is available just now ? Your father's will is not yet proved, remember."

"I will see what I have with me," and Victor, still standing, pulled out his purse, and began confusedly counting over the few banknotes and coins which it contained. Suddenly he thrust it into his pocket with a wild look. "I shall lose the train ; I must be off," and he began to hurry across the room.

In a second the Rector had grasped him by the arm. "You shall *not* go !" came his stern command.

The young man strove with all his might to free himself, but the Rector was still the stronger of the two ; there was a momentary struggle, then mad with rage, with finding himself helpless against superior force, Victor raised his hand and struck his uncle in the face.

Taken utterly by surprise, Arthur Byrne let

Victor's arm fall, and started back. His blue eyes flashed like steel; the blood rushed crimson into his cheeks; for the first minute he felt the insult to his grey hairs, his position, his relationship, to be a mortal one, and that henceforth all must be at an end between his nephew and himself. He would leave Victor's house at once, and never enter it again.

Victor sprang back also; he stared wildly at the Rector; then it came upon him all at once what it was that he had done, and he burst into one shuddering, despairing cry—"Oh, Uncle Arthur!"

There was a minute of awful silence. The two men stood facing each other. Arthur Byrne looked very stern and dignified, and now quite pale, except where his cheek still bore the mark of his nephew's hand; his compressed lips twitched a little, otherwise he was motionless.

Victor leant his hand heavily on the table; his head hung down, he shook all over. He knew now what it was that he had done. He had offered an indignity for which he could not dare to ask forgiveness, an indignity which—as the saying is—can only be washed out with blood, to the man who, all his life long, had been to him as a father, loved, honoured with a certain awe, to whom he owed all that was best and happiest in the past. He did not attempt

to leave the room now, he felt as though he were his uncle's prisoner, to be dealt with by him as he thought fit.

At last he said—for the Rector's continued silence was growing more than he could bear—in a hoarse, gasping voice—"I am all they say I am, and worse! If you would only half kill me, and make me atone for it!"

Then Arthur Byrne, who was now quite himself again, answered very gravely and kindly—"You hardly knew what you did, I feel sure of that; you were like a man in delirium. I freely forgive you, my dear boy."

"No, no; you ought not to forgive me! I shall never forgive myself—After all your goodness to me! I should like to cut off my hand!"

"Shake hands with me instead."

But Victor shrank away, as if unworthy to touch his uncle's offered hand, and overwhelmed by meeting kindness instead of the severity which he deserved—by realizing the love which he had repaid by insult, he fell upon his knees, hid his face on the table, and burst into an agony of crying. He had not shed one single tear since his troubles had first fallen upon him; but now the re-action had come, and hot tears, which seemed to him like drops of blood, streamed down his face, and he sobbed until he was quite convulsed.

Arthur Byrne stood by him with his hand sometimes resting on his shoulder, sometimes stroking his hair; once more Victor was to him, the wilful, passionate, yet ever darling child, whom he had brought up—"My poor boy—" he thought—"he is very young to have suffered so much; he is only one-and-twenty." Arthur Byrne stood by him, without a word, with only that mute caress; until at last Victor laid his cheek against his uncle's hand, sobbing quietly—like the poor demoniac from whom the evil spirit had at last gone out—torn, exhausted, but in his right mind.

By-and-by he raised his head a little, but remained kneeling, with his clasped hands resting on the table before him; there was a certain forlorn satisfaction in thus humbling himself, until he remembered how often in times past he had knelt before the Rector—at the Altar, which thought added a fresh touch of horror to his remorse. He said—almost too worn-out to speak above a whisper, "I don't ask you to forgive me, sir; there are some things which are beyond forgiveness. But, for God's sake, Uncle Arthur, don't go away and give me up entirely!"

"I will never give you up, my son; never, so help me God!"

Victor felt somewhat comforted. "What do

you wish me to do, sir? I want to submit myself entirely to you."

"First of all, then, believe that I forgive you, as I hope God will forgive me my sins. And now rise—" Arthur Byrne was quick to seize upon and to use for Victor's own good, the advantage which Victor had given him.—"Ring the bell, order the dog-cart to be taken back to the stables, and your portmanteau to your room."

Victor obeyed instantly. When Jennings entered the room, there was no sign of the stormy scene which had just been enacted there. The Rector stood on the hearthrug with his back to the fire, reading, or pretending to read, a newspaper. The young Squire was looking out of window, and gave his orders without turning round.

"Now, Victor," said Arthur Byrne presently, in his cheerful, kindly way, "I know you are longing for me to tell you something to do; to set you a penance, in fact. Well, this shall be it. As soon as you have recovered yourself a little, come out with me, and let us drive round the estate together. I want to make a rough estimate of the time and labour and capital it will require to put everything in a thorough state of repair. Give your mind entirely to this to-day, if you wish to please me."

As they drove about the Manor together,

Victor did his utmost to fulfil his uncle's charge. But he looked pale and exhausted, as though the strain were too great for him, long before they had done their work. When he returned home, Victor was fit for nothing but to lie on the sofa for the remainder of the day. He was very silent and subdued; he never spoke to his uncle unless the latter addressed him first; but his sad, wistful eyes often turned towards him with a touching reverence and gratitude, and he constantly watched for little opportunities to serve and please him.

Another melancholy day passed away; and Arthur Byrne began to fear that Victor's youthful spirit was entirely breaking beneath the pressure of his great and various troubles. "At all events, he shall not vex himself about me," thought the Rector; and he determined to try once more to cheer his nephew; to heal his wounded self-respect, even though it involved speaking of what was acutely painful to both of them to remember—of what they would henceforward shrink from even hinting to each other, because it would be a humiliation, a sort of indecency almost, to do so.

"Victor," he began, "you seem never to think of the words—'forgetting those things which are behind.'"

"It is sometimes easier to forget the wrongs

one has suffered, than those one has done," answered Victor, gloomily.

"But, my dear fellow, if I can forgive and forget—" Victor winced as if his uncle had touched an open wound, but the Rector went resolutely on—"If I can forgive and forget, cannot you? Don't you know that a man should never be too proud to forgive himself, or to be forgiven?"

"Yes, I hope I am forgiven; but how can I atone to you, sir? That is what I am always thinking."

"Certainly not by never speaking to me unless I speak to you. And I tell you plainly, that I am not going to stand it any longer. Are all the happy years we have spent together to go for nothing, because of one moment's madness? No, Victor; if you want to atone to me, you will show that you believe me, when I tell you that you are just the same dear son to me now that you have always been."

Victor smiled, a wan, wistful smile, like the sun shining through a rainy cloud. "You are awfully good to me, Uncle Arthur. There is not another man in the world who would have borne with me as you have done. Yes, I know that one may sometimes learn best by forgetting. I will try from this day forward to bury the past, and begin a new life. A strange,

lonely sort of life it will be. Never mind, I have got only my deserts."

The Rector made no reply. Perhaps he saw that Victor's faults could be entirely conquered only by some such terrible discipline as that through which he was now passing; and that Providence was dealing with Victor the man as he himself had dealt with Victor the boy—showing the deepest tenderness in the guise of severity, sparing him no suffering which might have the effect of strengthening and steadying his character.

From that day forward a great change evidently took place in Victor. The remembrance of his conduct to his uncle sobered him, as perhaps nothing else could have done. His bitterness, his vehemence seemed to have passed away. He no longer railed at the sentence which society had passed upon him—though a severe, it was not altogether an unjust one. The world had simply modified its reasoning where he was concerned, and had judged him by his capabilities rather than by his acts. Providence had saved him from actually committing the crime which was imputed to him; the will, the disposition to commit it, existed in his nature. He saw now where all those desperate impulses—that legion of devils which had lately possessed him—might have hurried

him ; he realized, as if a hand had roughly pulled him back from falling over a precipice, what it meant by throwing off all self-control, as he had longed to do. However he might abhor them now, all the vices, all the crimes of his family, were latent in himself.

"I am sure that the old tradition is true, and that there is a curse upon me," said Victor to his uncle, sorrowfully, "or I never could have felt as I have done lately."

"Well, now, my dear fellow, let us look at that idea rationally—rationalistically, if you like—and see what we really mean by it. Do you suppose that centuries ago, in consequence of the sin of a certain Malreward, generation after generation of his then unborn descendants were doomed, against their will, for no fault of their own, to live lives more miserable and more wicked than those of other men? Because, if you believe that, you must be a Calvinist."

"Of course, if you put it in that light, the idea seems perfectly irrational, and involves, as many popular doctrines do, crediting the Ruler of the world with injustice. If a man is pre-ordained to be a vessel of wrath, he not only fulfils his own nature but the will of God, if he lives in sin—which is absurd."

"Exactly so. But your real idea of the Malreward curse bears much the same relation to

the traditional one, as your doctrine and mine of the fall of the human race bears to the Calvinistic one. As Robertson says, 'Original sin is not the guilt of an ancestor imputed to an innocent descendant; but it is the tendencies of that ancestor living in his offspring and incurring guilt.' "

"Yes, that is just what I believe."

"Well, it is an every-day fact that a family may have for centuries its own peculiar tendencies, characteristics, what may be called its destiny, that is, a certain inherited type, appearing in one generation after another. What seems to be the especial Malreward temperament is one very sensitive, ardent and sympathetic, full of affection, passion and enthusiasm; fearfully liable to temptation and to injury, from its extreme susceptibility to outward impressions; capable of divine heroism and of grossest vice, of rising to a higher heaven and of sinking to a lower hell, than is possible to colder, calmer, obtuser natures. So that those of the Malrewards who have been endowed with this temperament, have been born into a life which they may make supremely noble and beautiful, but which in any case will be a life of peculiar danger and difficulty. And, in a number of cases, many enough to give rise to the tradition that a curse is on the family, the Malrewards have

yielded to the temptations, and have thrown away the splendid gifts of their nature. But to those of you who have overcome—as, on the whole, you, dear boy, have overcome hitherto—the glory will be brighter, just as the strife has been harder, than it is to other men. And ‘every sin you slay, the spirit of that sin will pass into you, transformed into strength.’”

The following day, Arthur Byrne and Victor Malreward left the Court for Tregalva Rectory.

CHAPTER IX.

Blessed is the man who has found his work—let him ask no other blessedness.—CARLYLE.

THE winter passed away somewhat drearily for Mrs. Stansfield Erle, in her usual round of calling, shopping, country dinner-parties, long evenings alone with her silent, sleepy husband. Her chief occupation was reading, which she did pretty regularly and systematically every morning, helped onward by her correspondence with Mr. Byrne, who frequently set her exercises, and gave her lists of questions to answer. She was going on with Latin and with Euclid, of which she had gained a smattering in her younger days, when staying at the Rectory, and she was also getting up a thorough knowledge of English history. Her chief pleasure was writing to Victor, and receiving his letters. Stansfield, being a wise man, did not attempt to forbid his wife's correspondence with her brother, knowing that, as he was not ubiquitous, it would be impossible for him to enforce his command, if the young people chose to dis-

obey it. One morning, coming down late to breakfast, Freddy found that her husband had opened, and was reading, a letter which had just come for her from Victor. She snatched it out of Stansfield's hand silently, but with a look of fire, and henceforth took good care to be downstairs when the postman came. Both husband and wife felt it to be a relief when, after the Christmas vacation, Victor returned to Oxford. Stansfield was spared the dread of Freddy contriving a meeting with the person who dared to claim a share of his wife's affections—whom he called, in one of his letters to his mother, "that violent, worthless young man." And Freddy was spared the cruel tantalization of knowing that her "darling boy," as *she* called him, was at Malreward Court, only a few miles away—sad, lonely, longing for an hour or two of her society, which, upon fearful penalties, she was forbidden to give him.

Stansfield bore Freddy no more malice for the reproaches which she had heaped upon him the night after he had carried her away from Malreward Court, than he would have seriously resented the crying of a naughty, but dearly-loved child. If ever he thought of the attachment existing between the brother and sister, it was only to make him more than ever determined to set young Malreward's conduct to his

late father in the right light (as he called it) to the world—to assure society that, until the unhappy young man could clear himself from all complicity with the undoubted criminal, Mark Deverell, he must be an alien from those who were unfortunately related to him ; and no one need fear meeting any such doubtful character when they did him (Stansfield Erle) the honour of visiting Arbutus Villa. It only made him more than ever determined to pity and forgive his wife's natural and feminine blindness to her brother's real disposition, and to protect her, even at the risk of wounding her feelings, from all association with him ; to endeavour, by much love and cherishing, to win her affections away from one so unworthy of them, and to attach them all to her husband, who ought to be the lord, the sun, the centre of her universe. So Stansfield, whose love for his wife, if a selfish passion, was also a real and strong one, talked nonsense to Freddy, and called her fond names, and bought her pretty dresses and expensive jewelry, and paid her compliments about her music, when she played to him in the evenings, while he went sound asleep and snored an accompaniment ; looked at her proudly when, in some costly toilet, she went into company with him ; nearly worried her to death with cares about her health, which during this

winter was somewhat delicate, and altogether made a great fuss over her, as he had done ever since he had married her—had bought the beautiful slave who had taken his fancy.

Meanwhile, Freddy tried to be grateful and loving, and to conceal from her husband that she would have preferred being without his presents and his petting, since all the time he deprived her of everything she really valued—liberty, sympathy, congenial friends, the occasional companionship of her brother. She felt almost maddened when he heaped obligations upon her, which only served to forbid her free speech, and to rivet her fetters. Sometimes, when her heart was very hot within her, and it seemed as though she must give utterance to her thoughts or die, she would turn to the commonplace book, which she had kept ever since she was a schoolgirl, and she—this admired and cherished wife—would dash down a few sentences such as these :

“In the opinion of the world, the *raison d'être* of women is the pleasure and welfare of men. Accordingly, the female sex is divided into two great classes. The first may be briefly described as the prey of men, as sparrows are the prey of the sparrow-hawk. It is absolutely necessary for the well-being of men in a highly-civilized state of society that this class should

exist, and should be amply supplied ; and for this reason, amongst others, the entrance of women into trades and professions, which would enable them to gain an independent livelihood, is to be discouraged. That in order to supply this need of civilization, a large number of potential workers and producers are withdrawn from the commonwealth ; that they exist in a state of slavery and degradation, and are denied even the civil rights which other women possess ; that they are under the ban of the Church and of the State, which brands them as pariahs in the same breath as it proclaims them to be the props of its good order ; that they are extremely liable to die deaths of agony, and, if parsons speak truly, to be burned eternally in the world to come—is a matter which concerns only the women themselves, and not the men for whom they exist.

“ The other great division is that from which men take their wives. And as, according to common but apparently contradictory ideas, the ordering of households, and the bearing of lawful heirs, is the end for which these women were created, whilst at the same time, if women were allowed to make single life easy, happy, and lucrative, men would have a serious difficulty in finding wives, it is necessary that this class also should be entirely depen-

dent upon men for their support, and that they should be taught that they have no concerns and no interests beyond those of their own households. Another end of their creation being to smooth men's road to Heaven, and to purify them, (when they wish to be purified,) women are allowed to believe themselves superior to men upon one point, the religious instincts; praying and church-going, devoutness and chastity are supposed to come to them naturally, by the mere fact of their sex, and their salvation being a simpler, is also a matter of less moment than that of men. Finally; in order that these women may respect, believe in, and be subordinate to, their God-appointed rulers, it is absolutely necessary that they should *not know too much*; that they should be as far as possible kept in ignorance of the lives men lead when out of their sight, and of the very existence of the other great class of their fellow-women; that they should be carefully guarded from the insidious approaches of a liberal education, and from all political and scientific ideas; that they should not be allowed to learn anything which would enable them to compete on equal terms with their masters, but only those arts and accomplishments which heighten the attractions of sex."

Of course Freddy was quite ready to admit that there is another side to the question; and, as

she felt, it makes all the womanhood boil within honest women, when they see the story of "Pelleas and Etarre" acted, as it so often is, in real life. The man, youthful, noble-hearted, pure; the woman, it may be, a Helen Erle, flinging away the exalted love and faith bestowed upon her, in order to make a better match; and so on, through lower grades of feminine unworthiness, from the thinly-veiled voluptuousness of some ball-room flirt, striving by coarse attractions to drag him down to her own level; to those women just one step below her—women with eyes "set on fire of hell," such eyes as Freddy had once seen, when separated a few yards from Victor, a boy of sixteen, in the crowd of a London street, glaring into her brother's innocent face, and from which he had shrank away with a shiver. "Nevertheless," said Freddy, "men having been for ages the governing class, the present state of things, political, social, domestic, must be the fruits of their legislation."

One April morning, Mrs. Stansfield Erle, having been studying mathematics, for which, like many women, she had an especial turn, threw aside her books with the feeling of a school-boy, that it was a sin to go on "grinding" in such lovely weather, ordered her pony-carriage—which, now Victor was safe at Oxford, her

husband once more allowed her to drive about in as she chose—and with a peculiarly prim and respectable looking old groom behind her, she went for a long country expedition.

It was an exquisite day in early spring. The whole world had awakened from its winter sleep, and was full of stir and hope and joyful upspringing, full of soft, delicate tints, like an unfinished painting which bears the first colour washes from a master's hand. Pale blue over the clear heavens, tender misty green in copses and hedgerows, rosy, shadowy purple on budding trees, crowds of azure dog violets, meek faced primroses looking up into the sky from amidst their nests of fresh crinkled leaves, an emerald film of vegetation proving that life is stronger than death, and gaining the victory over last year's fallen leaves which had covered the ground ankle deep in the woods, a dazzling veil of bridal white thrown over orchard trees; and everywhere sunshine, sweetness, perfume, song. The air was full of life, of rapturous joy in mere existence—young lambs bleating, rooks cawing over their newly repaired nests, black-birds singing as if they were intoxicated, thrushes at once pensive and impetuous; a lark lost in the sky and in his own ecstasies; willow wrens just arrived, and warbling all over the woods like ripples of water; tit-mice full of

conversation, swinging head downwards from the branches; yes, and already the rich contrast of a black-cap, that rogue and mocking bird.

When nature is glad we poor human creatures try to sympathize with her, we yearn and long to feel her youth, her rapture, her renewal of hope, and end often enough in an intense sadness, a restless craving after we know not what. Not for sinful, immortal, divinely unsatisfied humanity, is the stainless, perfect, contented, finite joy of mortal things.

Freddy drove through the country lanes, with their varnished green hawthorn hedges, and banks starry with primroses, feeling that the dazzling brilliance, the lack of shadow in the outer world, and the bleak grey monotony of her own existence, alike intolerable. She was now, although she did not remember the fact, within the bounds of the Malreward estate. Presently she saw, talking together in a field, two men, with their backs towards her; the one on foot stout, middle-aged, in a rough brown suit, the other sitting on a thorough-bred bay mare—a tall, bright-haired, slightly-made, young man in deep mourning, with a black retriever lying on the grass by his side. Freddy's heart gave a great bound—the blood rushed to her pale cheeks. She pulled up her pair of ponies, threw the reins to the groom, saying, "Drive up and down till

I return." She sprang out, opened the gate, and hurried across the field.

She was almost breathless when she reached him, "Victor!" was all she cried.

He started round, and saw her; he saw his sister's sweet, flushed young face, full of intellect, of a lovely tenderness, with a mingling of power and childlikeness in it—bright-coloured, with black crape hanging about her golden hair—he saw his sister's face upturned to him with a rapture of surprise and joy.

Victor was off his horse in an instant; he took both her hands and kissed her without a word, then with a hurried "Excuse me, I must wish you good morning now," to the man with whom he had been talking, one of his tenants—he offered his arm to Freddy, and with Boadicea's bridle in his other hand, they began to move across the field.

The farmer looked after them with a smile. He could suppose nothing but that the lady who had broken in upon their conversation was the young Squire's "sweetheart." His prosaic nature could not imagine the possibility of such an affection as existed between this brother and sister. "Eugenie de Guerin never loved her brother Maurice more than I love Victor," Freddy often thought.

Victor fastened Boadicea to the gate, and

then, that sweet spring day, the brother and sister sat down on a mossy primrose-covered bank, like two children escaped from school, from hard tasks and harsh masters, into liberty and open air and sunshine. Their words came fast enough now, broken and incoherent with delight.

"Darling old Freddy, who would have thought of seeing you here!"

"My dear, sweet boy, I thought you were in Oxford!"

"So I was until yesterday; when I came down for Easter, just to look after things a little."

"Oh—Easter—I had forgotten it was so near. Was there ever such a piece of luck as my driving this way to-day? To think we have not seen each other for six months; not since that evening—" Freddy checked herself, a dark shadow, the remembrance of her husband swept over her. She looked anxiously at Victor; she fancied, now that the first flush of excitement had passed away—that his face was thin and worn, and had the appearance of delicate health. "And how are you, dear old fellow?" she said; "tell me all about yourself."

"Oh there is not much to tell. I am very well, of course; a man who has as much to do as I have, can hardly be otherwise. I am read-

ing hard for 'Greats,' and it seems to me that every day of my life I receive business letters, and answer them—business connected with the estate, I mean."

"And your friends in Oxford; are they all well?" Freddy looked on the ground as she spoke; she was desperately anxious to know whether his standing in college society was affected by the cruel slanders of this country neighbourhood.

"All well, thanks." Perhaps, with the quick insight into each other's feelings which the brother and sister possessed, he guessed what Freddy was thinking, for he answered very calmly, "I do not go into society so much as I did. Of course Wardour and Ellis, and Chetwynd, and a few more, are just the same to me as ever. But I have to be careful, and not go to their rooms when any strangers, or men who have known me slightly, are there. One or two cuts direct, and one or two freshmen declining to be introduced to me, have taught me my place. I believe that there is a strong feeling amongst some of the men, that I ought never to have returned to St. Thomas'. And one or two think everything may be forgiven to a man who took a First in Mods."

"Oh, Victor, my darling!" cried Freddy, pressing his hand in hers.

"Never mind," he answered, with a serene, sweet smile, "do not vex yourself about it, dear. The greatest drawback of Oxford life is the perpetual interruption which society causes to one's work. So you see, if I am more alone there than I used to be, so much the better for my chances of another First."

"Do not work too hard, that is all." It is not an unfrequent cry from sisters to brothers at college—sisters who mistake the pale looks of dissipation for those of study. But in Victor's case the admonition might have been needed.

"No fear of my doing that—I have plenty of rowing in Oxford, plenty of riding here."

"I wonder how you could have endured to go back to Oxford. I know I can never bear to think about the last time I was there."

"There, that will do," and Victor winced. After a minute he went on in a low voice, "I wonder, too, how I lived through the first week after my return to St. Thomas'. Don't let us talk about it. Even now, when I have become used to the difference in my whole life, I find it hard to believe that I ever could have found any charm in Oxford. It is to me now just as dreary and uninteresting as the rest of the world. Now, dear old Freddy, let us talk of something else." There came back to his face the sweet, patient, pathetic smile, which often

beamed there now. It seemed as though he had learned to face the world calmly, firmly, without pride, without bitterness, knowing himself to be innocent of the crime which was imputed to him ; and yet that his sufferings were not wholly undeserved. It was just this touching sweetness and humility which, combined with pluck and high principle, made Victor so loveable. As Arthur Byrne had said, there was about him, despite his faults and his follies, so much of the bloom of purity, the beauty of goodness, the grace of God.

“I want to tell you what Uncle Arthur has done,” Victor went on. “His goodness to me is beyond everything. You see that when I first came into the estate, I found everything in the most frightful state of neglect, going to wrack and ruin as fast as it could go. I know Stansfield had ordered a little here and there to be done in the way of repairs ; but I suppose he did not consider himself justified in making any considerable outlay upon the property. Well, I consulted a land agent, and went thoroughly into matters ; and the more I did so, the more I was appalled, at the amount of work and the amount of capital required before the estate could be put into anything like the most commonly decent condition. Just consider, Freddy—twelve new labourers’ cottages to be built,

three farmhouses, with all their buildings, to be improved, and added to; the church to be restored, the Vicarage, the schools, and the Court itself to be put into thorough repair, from 800 to 1000 acres of land requiring drainage, and gates, fences, and countless etceras all over the property to be mended or renewed. Besides which, as I am not going to have the Malreward Arms, or any other public-house on my estate, I must have a working-man's reading-room, as there is at Tregalva—a sort of club, where they can see the papers, and smoke, and have tea and coffee. Now, was it not all enough to make a fellow feel ready to hang himself? I declare I used to muddle myself over long columns of figures and intricate calculations, until I threw down my account books and papers, with my head ready to split, even to think of the work which was before me. Now, the question was—my income from the estate averages, as I suppose you know, Freddy, £3,000 a year?"

Freddy was quite aware of this fact. Victor had always taken her into his confidence; while she knew no more than an absolute stranger what was her husband's yearly income. "What do women know about business?" was Stansfield's frequent remark.

"Well, of course it would be a hopelessly

slow way of going to work, even in the economical manner in which I intend to live, to restore the estate out of my income. I must have capital, and plenty of it too. As I was talking the matter over one day last winter with Uncle Arthur, he perfectly startled me by offering to lend me £11,000 which he had invested in various securities. I would not hear of it at first. I told him it was the most imprudent, unbusiness-like thing he could do, and I wondered that a man of his age and experience should dream of proposing it to a young fellow like me. However, he talked, and argued, and insisted, and got his own way with me in the end, as his Reverence generally does. I must say, for my own credit, that we have arranged the whole thing in a strictly business-like manner. I am to pay him five per cent. yearly interest, and I have just been insuring my life for the exact sum I have borrowed, £11,000. And I shall repay him the principal in instalments, as I am able. Well, they began digging out the foundations of the labourers' cottages before I went back to Oxford last term, and now they are really beginning to rise from the ground. Would you like to drive round that way and look at them? I shall be glad to know what you think of the site I have chosen."

"I should like to see them above all things," replied Freddy, eagerly.

"Next week I have an architect coming down from London to look at the church, and to form plans and estimates about the restoration. Then the Vicarage and schools are being put into thorough repair. Poor old Groves shall have things comfortable about him for once in his life, if I can manage it. He is coming to dine with me this evening, as he often does; he is glad to get away from the painters and white-washers, and I am thankful for his company in my solitude. So you see, altogether, Freddy, I have my hands full."

They walked through the lanes, Victor leading his horse, and the pony-carriage following at a respectful distance. "Now tell me a little about yourself," said Freddy.

"Well, of course, it soon occurred to me, what does a man like myself, who has no intention of marrying, and who, partly from choice and partly from necessity, means to keep very little company, want with a large half-furnished house like the Court? Therefore, as soon as it has been thoroughly done up, I shall try to let it on a lease, selling some of the furniture, and warehousing such as I wish to keep, pension off the Jennings', and sell all the horses except Boadicea. I daresay I shall get four or five hundred pounds a year clear profit from letting the Court, park, and shooting."

"It seems to be an admirable idea, that is, for the present." But Freddy thought, "Of course Victor cannot now bear even to think of marrying, but he will change his mind before long. He is the last man to be happy in single life." "But then, where," she asked, "do you mean to live?"

"Well, there seemed to be a difficulty about that, certainly. There is no small house vacant in the neighbourhood, lodgings in Donnistone were, of course, out of the question, on account of the distance from my work on the estate, and other reasons." (Other reasons being, as Freddy knew well, Stansfield Erle.) "However, I have found my future home," he said, smiling a little sadly. "The head-keeper's lodge has been shut up ever since poor Deverell went away. There is another keeper's cottage, you remember, the other side of the park, where Selby lives, who is a middle-aged, steady sort of fellow, you know, and, with his son under him, has the sole charge of the covers at present. So, at Deverell's old house, with poor Nell for my companion,"—the retriever, hearing her name, looked up at him, and wagged her tail—"and, as Deverell had, some old woman from the village to 'do for me,' and a boy to look after Boadicea, I mean to take up my abode for some years of my life. Having my house rent-free, and no establishment what-

ever to keep up, I certainly shall be able to live there on less than £300 a year."

"And how long will it be before you leave Oxford?"

"I shall have finished my twelve terms by the end of next Michaelmas term. Then I shall come home, go on reading here, and go in for 'Greats' as soon after as possible, which will probably be in another year from that time. I shall be only four and twenty even then. Life does seem to me rather long and blank sometimes."

"Oh, Victor, if you only knew what it seems to me!" cried Freddy, involuntarily. "If you are lonely, at least you are free!"

They had now come to the spot where masons were busy about the new cottages. There was nothing picturesque in the scene at present—the trampled mud, the heaps of mortar, the squares of the yellow stone of the district lying about, and the buildings just advanced enough to show the ground plan of one or two of the cottages. An artist would have preferred to paint hovels with broken latticed windows, mossy thatch broken here and there and showing the rafters beneath, walls weather-stained and many hued. In which the artist would have preferred to live, is another matter. However health and beauty may be combined in the human frame, they are rarely

so in the world of nature. Even the situation which Victor had chosen for the new cottages, open, breezy, sunny as it was, was not so charming to the eye as the wooded, fever-haunted valley in which the Malreward village stood at present.

As Victor spoke to the workmen, and explained the designs to Freddy, and consulted her upon various matters of detail, and caught at one or two suggestions she offered, the flush of interest and animation that came over his face made him look as bright and as handsome as he had done in happier days. The blessed "Gospel of Work" was having its due effect upon him. Freddy thought what a different life Victor might have made for himself. He had deliberately chosen to live in a place where he was to a large extent under social ostracism, in order that he might do his duty to his dependents, and to the very society who looked upon him with suspicion, by improving to the utmost the land which he had inherited, but which, as he believed, he merely held in trust for his country. He had chosen to do this, instead of spending on himself the income he derived from his estate; instead of enjoying a country gentleman's pleasures, hunting, shooting, jovial company. For if some men had declined to visit Malreward Court, he would, like

his father, soon have found plenty of a lower stamp who would have accepted his hospitality. And he was now about to betake himself to a cottage on his own land, and rigidly restricting his personal expenditure, to use every farthing he possessed for the restoration of the Malreward estate. Something of her surprise and admiration Freddy expressed to him, when he answered—

“Well, the fact is, I have come into an inheritance of the most frightful neglect and mismanagement of all kinds. I don’t say that this agricultural sort of life is the one I should have chosen for myself; far from it. If I had my wish, I should divide my time pretty much between Oxford, London, and the Continent, and follow my natural bent towards the literary profession. But, you see, one is born to this sort of thing, and one cannot get out of it. It goes rather hard with a man, I confess, when his natural tastes and his inherited responsibilities are at variance.”

“But you could let the whole property, and live elsewhere, if you chose. After all, the world would say that you had a right to do what you liked with your own.”

“Ah, Freddy, I have fought that all out with myself, and have, I hope, conquered the temptation for good and all. I believe there never

was a maxim more immoral than the one you have just quoted. There is no such thing in life as having any possession so much your own, that you have a right to do what you like with it. There is nothing that a man can have, that he is not simply steward to. And one has less personal right to land, than to any other other property. There is no just ownership in land distinct from the improvement of it. I have no right to keep my land a bog, or to turn it into merely a game-preserve; because I should thereby deprive my country of something of which the supply is limited, and is essential to to the nation's well-being. Neither have I the right, simply for the sake of my own personal freedom and enjoyment, to cast off the responsibilities which have come upon me by the fact of being my father's heir—heir, you see, not only to the land itself, but to the consequences of his neglect.”

They walked away from the cottages, still deep in conversation. “My dear old Freddy,” said Victor, at last, “here have I been running on all about my own affairs. But if you only knew the good it does me to have your interest and sympathy in my work! I feel twice as lively as I did when I came out this morning; things altogether look brighter to me. Now tell me how you have been faring since I saw you last.”

But as Freddy answered, there was not much to tell. She had made a solemn resolution that she would never again breathe one word to her brother of her domestic unhappiness. "It is no use complaining to Victor," she thought, "it only makes him unhappy and half angry with me. Men cannot understand us as we do them; which in the long run is a very good thing, as that lack of comprehension on their part is one of our principal weapons of self-defence."

As they returned to the pony-carriage, Freddy saw a very grim and uneasy look on the groom's face, which filled her with alarm and rage. "I have not the slightest doubt," she thought, "that old Batson will tell his master where I have been, and whom I have met." She felt inclined to set Stansfield and his spy at defiance, when Victor said with a wistful look, "I suppose you could not come home with me for an hour or two, could you? There are so many little things I should like to consult you about."

Then Freddy shuddered, remembering a horrible threat which her husband had dared to utter, and of which Victor little dreamt. "Oh, my darling! I cannot—I dare not!" she cried, clinging to his arm. Then she turned sharply to the groom. "Drive on, Batson; I shall overtake you directly." The man drove on at a snail's pace, peeping round now and then to see

if his young mistress were really following.

Freddy, forgetting all her good resolutions, furious at the thought of being under espionage, suddenly burst out with—"If I could get a divorce from him I would! I am very nearly mad, Victor! You were free from Mr. Malreward when you were twenty-one; but I shall never, never get away from Stansfield!"

Victor was pained, but not surprised, as he had been last year, when Freddy first complained to him of her troubles. "Hush, dear! I cannot have you talk like this to me. Remember, Stansfield is your husband."

"I do remember it—I remember it all day long, till I am ready to kill myself to get free from him! To think I cannot even enter your house—my only brother, and such a darling as you have been to me all my life long! As if I could love Stansfield because it was my duty! What is there to love him for, when he takes away from me everything that makes life worth having? Such a mockery to talk about husbands and wives as they do! 'Bone of one's bone,' indeed, one heart and one soul, when we have not two ideas in common! It is you and I, Victor, who are of the same flesh and blood, really, actually, children of the same mother, sympathising in all our thoughts and feelings. Why, oh why, did I go away and leave you? I might

have helped you ; I might have been everything to you until you married ; and then I should have been quite happy, as I was before I met Stansfield. Oh, Victor, I have thrown my whole life away !”

Victor could only take her hand in his, and say, “Freddy, my poor, dear Freddy, don’t talk like that—I cannot stand it.” For what was there for him to say ? He could only feel, as he used sometimes to feel when Deverell talked to him—as though the world were hopelessly awry. “If I ever seem cold and harsh to you——”

“Oh ! Victor, what do you mean ? You are always good and kind.”

“If I ever seem cold and harsh,” he repeated, “it is because honour, self-respect, every right feeling that a man has, would keep him from the mere appearance even, of making mischief between a husband and wife. Life does seem rather cruel sometimes I confess,” he sighed ; “but still I think you are better off than I am. For after all Stansfield loves you, and, whatever you may say, you know that in your heart of hearts you love him.”

Freddy made no answer ; she could not deny the accusation, and she would not acknowledge its truth.

“You have your husband, whilst I, you see—If it were not for Uncle Arthur and one or two

staunch friends, I should be entirely alone in the world. No, do not cry about it, dear, it is the will of God. I do not mean, of course, that it is God's will that mistakes and false accusation and separation of those who care for each other as you and I do, should happen; only as this has all happened somehow, and we seem powerless to prevent it, it must be God's will that we should bear it, patiently, bravely, cheerfully, if possible. After all, we have only ourselves to thank for much that we have to bear."

"I know that it is so, as far as I am concerned, but I do not see that that makes it any easier to bear."

"I think that it does, though, in one way. I cannot rage against the unfairness of the world, when I remember that I sowed the wind if I have reaped the whirlwind, and that my own temper gave Stansfield and people generally cause to suspect me. There is so much for which one needs forgiveness;" and Victor thought of that terrible scene last autumn between the Rector and himself.

The pony-carriage ahead of them now stopped altogether, and Batson was looking round with a grim and dogged air. "You'll please excuse me, ma'am, but master gave me orders to bring round his horse to the office at two o'clock punctually, and it's getting on towards that now, please, ma'am."

"There is no help for it ; we must part," said Victor in a low tone, with compressed lips. "Good-bye, my darling ; things will come right some day, and we shall meet again, never fear."

But Freddy clung to him, sobbing passionately. "Oh, Victor, I cannot give you up ! I care for you more than for anyone else in the world !" And she felt ready to defy heaven, earth, and her husband, to part her from her brother. There was only one created being to whom she would give him up, and that was to the woman he should choose for his wife. But Victor, with tender force, unloosed her hands, which were clasped round his arm, and put her into the carriage, quietly telling the groom to drive. He stooped over her for one last kiss, and then resolutely unheeding her cry—"Oh, Victor, Victor ! what shall I do ?" he walked away, steeling his affectionate heart against her, and dashing the tears out of his eyes.

CHAPTER X.

Oh, the child, too, clothes the father with a dearness not his due.

Half is thine and half is his : it will be worthy of the two.

TENNYSON.

IT nearly proved to be Victor's and Freddy's last meeting upon earth. One day in the following summer, Mrs. Stansfield Erle was suddenly and unexpectedly taken ill. Her husband was away on one of his not unfrequent expeditions into Cornwall ; he was telegraphed for, but as he was in some out-of-the-way mining district, somehow the telegram never reached him. There was soon hope that Freddy's imminent peril was passed ; but her little son was believed to be dying, and Mrs. Radcliffe—the married Sister of Charity as she seemed to be—to whose care and kindness the young mother in a great measure owed her life, sent in a great hurry for the parish clergyman, to christen the child. When Freddy was asked to give the name, "Victor," was her faint answer. She

thought that her child might bear that dear name through the few hours or minutes of its life.

But the mother lived, and the child lived, and both were fairly out of danger by the time that Stansfield came rushing home, having at last received the letters which by some blunder had been wandering after him throughout half Cornwall. Through the long hours of darkness, pain, and weariness, the heart of the young mother had turned to her husband again. "Oh, Stansfield! my Stansfield! where are you?" was her frequent inward cry. "Come to me, and I will love you so much!—come to your wife and your child!" Then, when at last he clasped in his arms the wife whom he had so nearly lost, and Freddy felt his great broad chest shaken with his sobs, the last sad months were all forgotten, and once more Stansfield was what he had been in their early married days—the being dearest, closest to her on earth. "Stansfield, my own, how I have been longing for you!" she whispered, with her head upon his breast; and he could only hold her in his arms and sob in speechless thankfulness. Freddy naturally disliked babies—she would rather, at that time, have been without a child; and yet some strange, mysterious instinct made her love Stansfield all the more because he was that child's father.

No one could be to her now quite what Stansfield was; they were bound together by the threefold cord, which cannot be broken—husband, wife, and child.

When Stansfield asked to see his son, Freddy said, in a tone of humble apology, "I am afraid you will think him a great fright. I had never seen a very young baby before, and I had no idea they were so ugly."

However, Stansfield tried to make the best of him. "He has got your beautiful dark grey eyes, my pet, at all events," said the father.

"And your pretty fair hair—what he has of it," replied the mother.

"And so Mrs. Radcliffe has had him christened—just like her, good, orthodox soul. And what name did you give him?"

Freddy made no answer. Her husband looked at her inquiringly; then she said in a low, troubled tone, "His name is Victor."

Stansfield gave the baby back to the nurse without another word. "Oh, Stansfield!" faintly whispered his wife, "don't be angry with me! They thought the child and I were going to die; and then it would not have mattered. It is not our fault that we have both of us lived."

"We will talk about this another time," answered Stansfield, quietly; and then again he

kissed his wife, and Freddy could not tell whether or no she was forgiven. But for some reason unexplained, some motive perhaps unknown to himself, Stansfield never again mentioned the subject.

Freddy never loved her husband more than during the protracted convalescence which followed the birth of her child. She was for a long time in that weakened state of mind and body, when Stansfield's petting, protecting ways soothed, not irritated her; nor was she then conscious of her husband's uncongenial disposition, and their want of real sympathy with each other. And she did not pine after Victor so terribly, when it was the will of Providence, her own invalided state, and not her husband's ill-will, which separated her from him. "After all," she thought, "I have grown so stupid, so weak in body and mind, that I should be no companion for Victor now; whereas it makes no difference to Stansfield if I am slightly idiotic." Victor did not forget her, however. Fruit and flowers and game used to be sent Freddy anonymously almost every day. She knew well enough from whom they came.

But as she slowly regained her health and strength, there revived in her the longings which often the very happiest of wives may feel—longings after something which no hus-

band can give her--longings after "her own people." And one day in the following winter, Stansfield, coming quietly into the nursery, and thinking with a proud complacency that his wife, with her soft, thoughtful face, with her fair-haired little son lying in her arms, would make a beautiful picture of a Madonna and Child—heard her, all unconscious of his nearness, whisper, with a sigh, "Oh! baby, little Victor, if you and I could only see dear Uncle Victor, just for one minute!"

Stansfield started as if his wife had struck him, then left the room unobserved. A half-formed plan was immediately resolved upon; and afterwards he said to her kindly, yet with a certain constraint in his tone, "My dear, I have been thinking how much I should like to take you abroad this winter. It would quite establish your health, and I could easily get away from the office just now. We will go to Rome; perhaps on to Naples, and we can leave our child with Mrs. Northey in perfect confidence."

Freddy eagerly caught at the idea. Foreign travel would indeed be a welcome break into the monotony of her daily life; for she did not find the possession of an unconscious, but by no means silent baby, the panacea for all married troubles which by some people it is supposed to be. Mrs. Northey, the nurse, was a well-

educated, middle-aged woman ; and, as Stansfield observed, was certainly more fit to be trusted with the care of the baby than a young creature like Freddy herself. Every other interest in life, according to Stansfield, Freddy ought to postpone to her child ; but child and all must be postponed to him, when he chose that she should do so. So not very long after Victor had left Oxford entirely, and returned home, Stansfield and Freddy set forth upon their travels without encumbrance.

Now Stansfield had been lately a good deal exercised in his mind with regard to his brother-in-law. One day Dr. Radcliffe had spoken to him in terms much plainer than Mr. Erle was accustomed to hear.

"I must tell you frankly, that your wife's confinement being a premature and very perilous one, was in a great measure owing to the anxiety and distress of mind from which she had been suffering beforehand. And I warn you I will not be answerable for the consequences to her health in the future, if you persist in forbidding her to see her brother."

Stansfield was a good deal startled, but he answered in a stolid tone, "Excuse me, Dr. Radcliffe, I do not see that you have exactly a right to interfere in private family affairs, such as these."

"It may not be my right, but it is very often my professional duty, to interfere in private family affairs. Just fancy yourself Mrs. Erle, for a moment, and consider what she must be feeling——"

"It requires such a stretch of imagination to fancy myself a lady," replied Stansfield drily, "that I may be excused from making the attempt."

"Bless the man! to hear him talk one would think he had never heard the maxim, 'Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you.' How are we to conduct ourselves decently, if we never try to fancy ourselves other people, and to enter into their feelings? I tell you to imagine to yourself Mrs. Erle's position—an only sister with an only brother, bound to each other by peculiarly strong ties of affection, owing partly to similarity of tastes and opinions, and partly to the fact of their being motherless, and worse than fatherless—imagine this sister at the very moment that her brother is overwhelmed with a succession of heavy blows, is suffering the cruellest of all misfortunes, false accusation, and bodily illness besides—imagine this sister forbidden to cheer, to comfort, even to see him!" Dr. Radcliffe paused a moment, he was almost overcome by the pathos of the situation he had described. Then, with a sudden change

of tone, he demanded, just as his old friend Arthur Byrne had done, "And what, Mr. Erle, is your reason for separating this brother and sister?"

"You were at the coroner's inquest upon the body of the late Mr. Malreward. I think I need hardly add another word."

"Thank God I am not a lawyer, and I can dare to speak out what I mean. You think that young Malreward murdered his father—at all events, that he connived at Mark Deverell's murdering him; you think this, or—" the doctor's tone lowered, he looked at Stansfield with penetrating eyes—eyes that could read symptoms at a glance—"you like to imagine that you do——"

Stansfield made no answer, and it might have been only Dr. Radcliffe's fancy that he flinched and changed colour.

"I understand, then, that you think, upon the evidence of a few angry words uttered under extreme provocation—we all know what that unhappy old man was—you think Victor Malreward is a parricide. All that I can say is—if that be the case, he is a very inconsistent young man. My cousin, Tom Wardour, who is his great chum at St. Thomas', a remarkably steady fellow himself, gives Malreward the highest character for hard work and good conduct al-

together at Oxford. I know young men in the same set, will often tell lies to shield each other; but Tom is not one of that sort. See how well Malreward came out at his first University examination; see what he is doing here, actually going to let his house and park and live in the keeper's lodge, in order to save every penny for the improvement of his estate, and of the condition of his labourers. He has been working day and night since he has been home for the long vacation; I tell him that he will make himself ill again; but he only says he has not a minute to spare, he must take his degree, and finish off his work at Oxford as soon as possible, and then give his whole mind to farming. And this is the man you want to kick out of society!"

Dr. Radcliffe had worked himself up to such a pitch, that he was forced to walk about the room; whilst Stansfield looked down, frowned, and bit his nails to the quick.

"Supposing," said the doctor, suddenly pulling himself up and facing the lawyer—"supposing we were all to be judged in like manner—judged upon the evidence of small circumstances to be guilty of great crimes! Are we any of us always so rigidly self-controlled as to be able to cast a stone at a fellow-creature? Supposing, Mr. Erle, that I were to believe you to

be a man of the worst morals, and to treat you as such, because once, some years ago, I caught you kissing a pretty girl in a conservatory after supper at a ball! You may have forgotten the little scene—I have not. Never mind” (the cautious, decorous lawyer, husband and father, was looking slightly discomposed), “I will not judge you as you judge Victor Malreward. Good morning, Mr. Erle; remember what I say; your wife will never get thoroughly well and strong again so long as you persist in what I do not hesitate to call your tyranny over her, and your injustice to her brother.”

Such words as these, coming from a man whom Stansfield liked and respected, had had more effect upon him than he chose to own. Many a time Freddy had ventured to mention in her husband’s hearing little facts about Victor which had tended to his praise; he had tried not to listen to her; he had answered coldly, or not at all. But he could not keep his mind from frequently and uneasily dwelling upon that “violent, worthless young man,” as he had called him. After all, just supposing, for the sake of argument, that Victor were innocent, as Dr. Radcliffe believed him to be, what hard measure had been dealt him! Stansfield was thankful that Helen had refused to marry her lover; one tie between the two fami-

lies was quite enough ; but still, Victor must have suffered a good deal from the breaking off of his engagement. Supposing (Stansfield smiled contemptuously at the thought of making any comparison between himself and Victor)—but just supposing Freddy had treated him as Helen had treated her betrothed ! “ Good heavens ! ” thought Stansfield, “ what I felt that day when my darling asked me to give her up ! ”

The qualities which Victor was now displaying—energy, perseverance, capacity for hard work, brave defiance of adverse opinion, self-denial to gain his end—were just those qualities Stansfield could sympathize with, and most admired in a man ; and he was forced to confess to himself that, whatever young Malreward might be, he was doing the best thing he could do under the circumstances. And then, supposing it were true what Radcliffe had said—supposing that his Frederica, his pet, his passionately-loved wife, were really injuring her health with fretting after this good-for-nothing brother of hers, could he refuse her anything she had set her heart upon ?—would she not love her husband all the more if he granted her just now and then, as a very great favour, permission to meet her brother ? It was now almost a year since Stansfield had seen Freddy

and Victor together, and he scarcely realized what a powerful rival in his wife's affections he still had in her brother. Two contradictory thoughts made Stansfield waver. One was his belief that by this time Freddy had almost forgotten Victor—Freddy's love and interests and sympathies had all been won by her husband for his own property. And the other thought was, if Freddy really were so infatuated about the fellow that she was losing her health, and, what was all important in Stansfield's eyes, her good looks—well, then, for Freddy's sake, and for the sake of her child, and because his precious little wife had been so ill that he had nearly lost her, he supposed he must begin to think about reconsidering his determination.

Then came the day when Stansfield had overheard his wife sighing after her brother, and once more the demon of jealousy entered into the husband. She had not forgotten him, then, this worthless boy!—she, his indulged and cherished wife, was not content, as every married woman ought to be, with her husband and her baby! Stansfield hardened his heart like Pharaoh, and would not let his captive go. He would deny himself anything for her sake; he would take her abroad, although long journeys bored him to death; he would buy her

jewelry, pretty dresses in every town they visited; he would tear himself away from his beloved office, his clients, and his parchments, and go dawdling and yawning about ruins and picture-galleries; he would do anything to please his darling Frederica—except letting her see her brother. And so Stansfield threw away his last chance of making voluntary atonement, and, all unconscious, went abroad to meet his severe but salutary punishment.

It was now the month of February. Victor had attained his twenty-third year, and had left Oxford. When it came to the point, it was a terrible wrench to him thus ending his University life twelve months earlier than, under other circumstances, he would have done. He had suffered much during his third year, it was true, but his first and second years had been to him a time of cloudless happiness, the one bright spot in his troubled young life. He felt—when he took leave of the beloved cluster of towers and spires, not to be seen again until he went up for his final examination—that he was parting with all cultured and congenial society, with intellectual sympathy, with the very atmosphere and breath of his life, to be henceforth condemned to solitary days, cast out from the companionship of his equals, condemned to dealings with tenantry, labourers, mechanics, to “talk of bullocks,”

agricultural machines, and drainage works.

However naturally distasteful as much of his present life was to him, he was too busy to spare time to think about its uncongeniality, or his own loneliness. And to any man in whom the constructive instincts were strong, as they were in Victor, who preferred the productive arts to the noble (so called) destructive ones, saving life to taking it, there was a great charm in overlooking the workmen who were busy everywhere about the estate, in watching order arising out of disorder; health, beauty, cleanliness, arising out of decay, squalor, and neglect. Wherever he went he could see some fruits of the labour he had already employed, and the money he had already expended since he had come into the property. The Vicarage was now a decent and comfortable house, the dark and malarious "Parson's pool" had been drained, and turned into a commonplace but wholesome kitchen garden. The schools had just been reopened since their thorough repair; service was held there on Sundays, for the church was now covered with scaffolding, and swarmed with workmen. Malreward Court had been renovated, both materially and spiritually; painters and whitewashers, with their prosaic cheerfulness, had purified many a dark, ghostly, ill-omened hole and corner; and Victor had, with stern

satisfaction, made a holocaust of his father's collection of bad French novels, and bundles of letters, many of which had been written by feminine hands. And now advertisements in the London papers had appeared, of the house, park, and shooting to be let.

The young Squire had taken up his abode at the head-keeper's lodge, with Nell, the retriever, as his companion, Mrs. Jennings, whose husband had died a few months before, as his house-keeper, and Boadicea housed in an outbuilding close by. All day long he was generally riding about his estate, looking after his workpeople, and consulting with his chief tenant, a man who had some knowledge of scientific farming. At dark he would return to his solitary dinner, then, after an hour's rest, he would read for "Greats" until he went to bed. A healthy, hard-working life, but not a very cheerful one. Sometimes he felt a longing for society which was almost intolerable. He could not always be "dropping in" at the houses of the few friends who remained to him—Mr. Groves, the Radcliffes, and one or two others. And this sitting hour after hour, through half the long winter nights, at a table covered with papers, and Greek and Latin authors, by the dim light of a reading-lamp, with not a sound but the clock ticking, and perhaps the trees sighing in the wind out of doors, in the

house haunted by dear and yet dreadful memories of Mark Deverell, tried his spirits in a manner which he called childish, but which he could not wholly shake off. He was ever beset by the fancy that some night, as he sat reading in the keeper's old parlour, where still his gun hung above the mantelpiece, and his engravings ornamented the whitewashed walls, and a few of his books stood upon the shelf—Victor was haunted by the fancy that Deverell would come striding in, with the heavy footstep and slight swagger which he remembered so well, and he should be forced to choose between the awful alternative—taking part with the murderer of his father, or delivering up his brother to justice. Many a time Victor started up; believing that he actually heard him, he would open the door and look out into the darkness. “Deverell, where are you? If you would only write to me—would only tell me the whole truth!” It seemed to him unspeakably dreadful that the man he cared for so much should have disappeared, should have been lost in the darkness and mystery of a suspected crime. Not one line had Victor received from him since the letter written from Liverpool, and all forlorn hope of his innocence had faded away from Victor's mind. “If I could only know where he was,” was Victor's constant thought. And at times he

regretted having come to live at the lodge, so haunted seemed the whole place with his unhappy brother—a man sinning, sinned against, deeply stained, and yet beloved.

One day, Victor had as usual ridden out to see how the new cottages were getting on, which were now very nearly out of the workmen's hands. They were ordinary model cottages, semi-detached, with three bed-rooms, and three living rooms in each, and each house had its large piece of garden ground. Victor looked at them discontentedly, with his artistic head a little on one side. "They are awfully gaunt and ugly," thought he, "with their raw-looking stone walls, and slated roofs; and yet I chose the best of all the plans submitted to me. I am certain it must demoralize people to live in such hideous places. What can I do with them?—have trellis-work and climbing roses and honeysuckles and those sort of things all over them? I will take care that the gardens are well stocked with flowers as well as vegetables, before the labourers move into them; as everyone knows, there is a wonderfully refining influence in flowers."

Victor rode on towards one of the covers, where the woodcutters were taking the decennial crop from the underwood. Here he paused and looked about him musingly. It is in the

afternoon of a soft growing day like this, with low grey clouds, and subdued gleams of sunshine, that one is most conscious of the coming on of Spring. The birds sing, the twilight lengthens, the men work on in the fields until six o'clock. Already the trees seemed to have thickened, and were flushed with a tender, ruddy purple bloom. There was a golden tinge throughout the hazel bushes, everywhere they were hung with graceful tassels of the tenderest yellow green. And there was a gleam of "satin shining palm," the balls of silver grey down had burst their red sheaths, and were breaking into yellow, powdery, perfumy blossom. There were tufts of curly, crinkled, emerald-green primrose leaves, a few buds and blossoms huddled together as if for warmth, and exhaled that faint delicious breath which has in it all sweet memories of Spring. There were young tufts of other leaves; forget-me-not, bugle, coarse burdock and teasel, and those odd leaves of mullein like morsels of a blanket. "Through the moss the ivies crept," and all kinds of ivy were here; leaves of blood-red veined with orange, purple veined with green, dark blue green veined with pale yellow green; every hue of bronze and emerald that ever was seen in an ivy leaf. The air was all stirred and rippled with the ecstatic song of

robins, the clear treble of wrens. The titmice were flitting from tree to tree, swinging from the branches, chirping like creaking hinges, and otherwise disporting themselves. A few fitful snatches of song were piped by the "storm-cock," as the country people call him, that hardy bird of February, who cares not for wind and rain—the sweet, plaintive, yet defiant notes suggested the thought of a brave heart, bearing up gallantly through sorrow and persecution. And then would burst forth the inexpressibly pathetic song of the thrush, in perfect harmony with that subdued and pensive February woodland. The dawning of the year comes "kerchiefed in a comely cloud"—has something of the pure light, the cool grey tones of sunrise. "The kingdom of God comes not with observation." With what silence, what stealth and secrecy of growth, what unimaginable subtlety of gradation, the order of nature passes on! Just as the stars elude our watching, and slip one by one into the slate-blue evening sky. There is no haste, no violence, no miracle—save the greatest of all, the miracle of perpetual order, of irrefragable law—in that calm, fair world.

To Victor, life itself seemed like that day, subdued, grey, placid, yet still with serene gleams now and then shining through its clouds,

and whispers of hope and joyful resurrection stirring its leafless branches. He had lost for ever the sparkle and effervescence of youth; but at least his days were calm, untroubled by the active ill-will of others, unruffled by his own once restless passions. "I am not unhappy," he told himself, "but I feel very old and sober." The world went on its way, and having once deliberately cast him out of its charmed circle, troubled itself no more about him. He went on his way also, thankful for this much, that he was let alone, and however severe he might feel it to be, accepting his sentence of exclusion from society quietly, believing that as his own faults had in a great measure caused that sentence to be pronounced, so his own exertions in the ordinary routine of daily life could alone in the course of time cause it to be reversed. There was little chance now that any fresh evidence would be discovered to clear him from suspicion; all that he could hope for was to "live it down."

On his return to the lodge that afternoon, he found awaiting him one of the foreign letters which he had lately received from Freddy. It ran as follows :—

" Grand Hotel, Marseilles, Feb. 22nd.

" MY DEAREST VICTOR,—You will be astonished to find us here; and here I am much afraid we

shall be forced to remain for some time to come. My husband is very ill. Just after I last wrote to you from Rome, he showed symptoms of an attack of malarious fever, which he caught, I believe, through staying out on the Campagna after sunset, though I begged and prayed him not to do it. The doctor whom we called in advised us instantly to leave Rome, and to go by sea to Marseilles; thence either proceeding to Nice, or home to England. We accordingly got Stansfield on board the steamer at Civita Vecchia, and at once he seemed to get better, sea-air having, you know, a wonderful effect upon Roman fever. Our spirits revived again; but no sooner had we come to this hotel, to remain a few hours before we started by the evening express to Lyons, than he had a sudden relapse, so that it was impossible to proceed farther. He has been very ill ever since we arrived here, now two days ago—sometimes he is quite delirious. If only I could get him home—if we were anywhere in England! I have a nurse to remain with him when I get an hour or two's sleep, as he cannot be left day or night; but she speaks the most bewildering patois; and even the doctor's directions I find sometimes most difficult to understand. You know, I was always awfully stupid about learning languages. I had thought of asking

some of Stansfield's relations to come to us, but, as you know, all his married sisters have young families, and their husbands are tied to their professions. I cannot write more now. Oh my darling, whatever may have happened in the past, I know how sorry you will be for my poor dear Stansfield! It is enough to break one's heart, to see him so ill and helpless as he is. I will write again to-morrow or next day.

"Your affectionate sister,

"FREDDY MALREWARD ERLE."

As soon as Victor had read this letter, he knew what his duty was to do. He knew his duty, but he shrunk from it, abhorred it. "For Freddy's sake I would go to the world's end; but how would Stansfield receive me, whom he has forbidden to enter his wife's presence?" It was not a pleasant prospect to undertake a journey of many hundred miles, only to be ordered out of the sick man's room as soon as he had entered it. Not that he was unwilling to attempt to do a kind action for an enemy in distress; but in some respects he would have preferred the task of nursing Stansfield if Freddy had not been with him. He was conscious that Stansfield had never thoroughly liked him, and for some reason or other he had always, even before Mr. Malreward's death,

tried to keep the brother and sister apart. "Surely he does not suspect me of trying to set Freddy against him. Have I not always done my best to silence her, even at the risk of seeming unkind, when she has given me a hint that she was not quite happy in her married life? Well, there is no one else to go to him, I suppose," said Victor, with a sigh, after racking his brains to think of some plan of befriending Stansfield, to which the sick man would not object; "and, for Freddy's sake, I must run all risks of making Stansfield savage. So, here goes," and the sharp struggle with himself ended in his pulling out his portmanteau, and packing a few clothes and books.

He went up to London by the night train, telegraphed to Freddy that he was on his way to her, slept a few hours at a hotel, and left London next morning at half-past seven. At Paris he just drove from one station to another, and managed to catch the evening express. He arrived at Marseilles by noon the following day.

CHAPTER XI.

"But to-day,"—and hot tears gushed from his eyes,—
"but to-day God has broken the hardness of my heart;
and, dear sir, look upon yourself no more as a murderer,
and say that you will forgive me, and pray for him who has
done you so fearful an injury."—*Sintram*.

WEARY, dusty, his brain all in a whirl with
the extreme rapidity of his journey, with
coming from moist, misty England, with its
grey skies and green earth, into the almost
Oriental climate of the south of France—sea
and heavens black with the intensity of their
blueness; sunshine blinding with the intensity
of its light; a land of extinct volcanoes, Roman
ruins, square-towered, red-tiled, green-jalousied
chateaux; a land of roses, orange-blossoms,
grey olive-trees, and dusty cypresses—Victor
drove down the hill from the railway station,
alighted at the Grand Hotel in "La rue Cane-
bière," sent up his card to Mrs. Erle, and in
another minute Freddy came rushing down the
broad staircase to greet him.

The brother and sister went off together into
one of those queer little cells of private sitting-

rooms which surrounded the great domed *salle-à-manger*. They were both almost overwhelmed at the first moment of their meeting. They had not seen each other for nearly a year—not since the birth of Freddy's child, when she had been very near death; and now they met again, it might be at the death-bed of Stansfield, the husband and brother-in-law who had parted them.

"Oh darling," said Freddy, "how good, how inconceivably good of you to come! It is just like you, that is all that I can say. I never dreamt of such a thing when I wrote to you."

"And how is poor Stansfield to-day?" asked Victor.

"He is just the same, I think." The bright light faded from Freddy's face, and she looked very sad. She looked more than sad, she looked worn and thin and pallid, so that Victor would hardly have known her if he had met her accidentally. "Oh never mind me," was her answer to all his inquiries after herself; "if I can only keep up till Stansfield gets well again, that is all I care about." And Victor felt that he could hardly be thankful enough that he had come.

After he had made his toilet, and had had the substantial lunch which Freddy had insisted upon ordering for him—for he confessed

that he had had no regular meal since he had left London—Freddy asked him to come to her husband's room. Just at the door she noticed Victor's heightened colour, and the touch of embarrassment in his manner.

"He is quite unconscious," she said sorrowfully; "he will not know you." She led the way into a bedroom, very French and prettily furnished, with polished floor, and great windows, which would not open when once shut, nor shut when once opened, with the inevitable vases full of paper flowers upon the mantelpiece, and alabaster clock, which would not go. Beneath a lofty alcove of crimson curtains lay Stansfield Erle, with closed eyes, sunken cheeks, labouring breath, restless hands. Victor stood looking down upon him; the man who, excepting his own father, had been to him the cruellest enemy he had ever had; the man who had left England in the prime of health and strength and vigorous manhood, and who was now a mere wreck of his former self; helpless, unconscious as his baby son at home. Great tears came into Victor's eyes. Before sickness as before death, all hatred, all desire of vengeance must pass away.

Victor soon settled in to the regular routine of a sick nurse's duties. Part of the day he and Freddy watched together in Stansfield's room,

sometimes talking, for they had much to say to each other, and Stansfield was beyond being disturbed by the subdued sound of their voices. Each went out at different times for a little air and exercise. During the afternoon Victor slept for a few hours, that he might be fresh for a whole night's watching; for by dint of coaxing, reasoning, and insisting, he prevailed upon Freddy's going to bed regularly every night in an adjoining room, and trusting Stansfield to his entire care. He soon saw the extreme necessity that Freddy should be spared fatigue; her once splendid health was sadly broken, she had never quite recovered the birth of her child, and the anxiety of the last fortnight had worn away her already impaired strength. Nevertheless it seemed as though she could hardly do enough for Stansfield; she watched over him with a remorseful tenderness. "It is so dreadful for me now to think that I should ever have spoken an unkind word of my husband," she said one day to her brother. "I feel as though I had never loved him half enough. He was so good and kind to me when I was ill, and now he is ill himself, and there is so little I can do for him. Oh when he gets well again, how I will try to be a good wife to him; how I will try to be happy, and to put up with everything! I am so grateful to you now, dear boy, that you would

never listen to me when I grumbled ; you will never think again of anything I said, will you?" she implored.

"Of course not," answered Victor. "I should never dream of remembering it." He said no more, it was not for him to speak of the relations between Freddy and her husband. For, all the time he knew Stansfield had been in the wrong, and Freddy—saving in the matter of complaining of her husband—had been in the right. Even there—"Well," thought Victor, "it was rather hard upon her, poor dear, that she should not be allowed to tell me all her troubles, when ever since we were children we have always come to each other for help and sympathy."

Freddy thought Victor had greatly altered during the past year ; he had, in short, grown up. The fiery ordeal through which he had passed had burnt out of him all his boyish sentimentality, all trace of an irritable temper even ; something of the buoyancy and charm of extreme youthfulness had departed also ; but in its stead had come a dignity, a sedate and sober manliness, quite as beautiful in its way. His figure and face were still rather thin ; but the one was vigorous and agile, and the other had the firm, clear look of perfect health, the look of a man who lived an active, temperate

life, who dreaded luxury and indolence as he dreaded sin. His great trials, instead of "driving him headlong to the devil," as at the first he had declared they would do, had steadied, strengthened, disciplined his character. "Chastened but not killed," were the words which came into Freddy's mind when she looked at her brother.

There was such happiness to them both in being together once more, after their year's separation, that little gleams of joy and brightness would flash across them, notwithstanding the sorrowful circumstances which had brought them together. Sometimes, as they sat by Stansfield's bedside, they would discuss Victor's plans about his estate, and they would talk, and smile, and get animated and absorbed, till suddenly Freddy would recollect herself, and turn in abrupt silence, and with a look of self-reproach, towards her unconscious husband. "How could I forget you even for a moment?" she seemed to say. And Victor could only rejoice that he was not first in Freddy's affections, as he had been a little while ago; it was enough for him that his presence cheered and strengthened her. It was contrary to the order of nature and of Providence that she should care more for her brother than she did for her husband; and he welcomed these little signs of

wifely love, though perhaps they made him feel more than ever that he was alone in the world. He tried to stifle a natural sigh. "Will any woman ever care for me as Freddy cares for Stansfield?"

Victor had always been unfortunate where the adverse sex was concerned. His boyish flames had preferred other boys; his one "grande passion" had been built on sandy foundations, and his betrothed wife had jilted him; the suspicions which were attached to him almost entirely shut him out from the society of ladies; for which reason, and because his plans of rigid economy and entire devotion to the restoration of his estate, pledged him to celibacy for several years to come—he must seek no woman's love. Not that he was conscious of wishing to do so. He believed that he should never get over the shock of finding Helen faithless; he believed that all his capacity of loving had died out; he believed that all thought of marriage was hateful to him; nevertheless, there were hours in his life when he felt very sad and lonely, missing, he knew not what.

For a few days after Victor's arrival at Marseilles, Stansfield lay between life and death. Then the fever took a favourable turn, and he began slowly to mend. But—an ordinary

symptom of the disorder, known as Roman fever—the extreme weakness of his brain was such that, even when he regained consciousness, it seemed as though he could scarcely express his simplest wants in words. It was painful to see this once powerful, clear-headed, self-asserting man reduced to utter helplessness of mind and body. He could not turn himself in bed; and when he spoke, he often struggled to find the word which he wanted, and could not remember. At first, his constant cry, in low, troubled tones, like a child calling for his mother, was, “Frederica—Frederica!” and his wife would have been ever at his side, ready to exhaust herself in efforts to move him, for in his restlessness he was always craving for a change of position; but Victor would gently but firmly interfere, sometimes even to the length of sending his sister out of the room.

“My dear Freddy,” he would say, “if I am to be of any use in the sick-room, you must let me have a little authority there. You cannot wish me to have two invalids on my hands at once, as I infallibly shall have, if you do not do as I tell you, and take care of yourself.” He asked the doctor to repeat to Stansfield, on the chance of the invalid being able to understand him, what he had already said to Victor himself, that Madame was in delicate health, and

must on no account over-exert herself, and that it was a marvellous piece of good-fortune that Monsieur *son frère* had arrived, for he comprehended admirably how to follow all the doctor's directions, and he would relieve the mind of Monsieur himself from all anxiety about Madame.

It was some time before Victor felt sure that Stansfield recognised him; whether the fretted, uneasy look on the invalid's face, when he was waiting upon him, rose from the fact that Freddy was not at hand, or whether it was because he knew and shrank from his brother-in-law. "How did you come here?" Stansfield asked one day in his feeble voice, after looking a long time at his masculine sick-nurse.

"By Dover and Calais, Paris and Lyons, as hard as I could rattle," was Victor's cheery answer.

Stansfield said no more, but seemed gloomy and dissatisfied. It was not the question he had meant to ask, or the answer he had wanted to receive, but he could not think of the word he intended to say. It was not "How," but "Why did you come here?"

But now Stansfield gradually became what he had never been in health, gruff, irritable, uncourteous—in fact the once strong man resembled a spoilt child. He would ask his wife to raise

him up in bed, then, when Victor bent over him to perform the little service for which Freddy's strength was quite unfitted, he would say crossly, "Let me alone, will you?" and Victor would quietly retreat. Soon, however, his restlessness would grow too much for the invalid, and he would be forced to beg Victor's help, which he did generally in the most ungracious manner possible. Often he would refuse to take his medicine if Freddy were not in the room to give it him, and Victor had to use gentle force to induce him to swallow it. But the nights were the most trying to both patient and nurse. "Where is Frederica; why does she not come to me?" was Stansfield's perpetual, petulant enquiry; and Victor had to tell him again and again, that Freddy was not strong enough to sit up with him, and the doctor had ordered her to go to bed, but that he, Victor, would be always there, ready to do anything for him that he wanted done; and Stansfield would lie in misery for some minutes, because he would not ask Victor to shake up his pillows, or perform some trifling office of the kind; but in the end of course he had to submit, and to submit over and over again. When Stansfield was most aggravating, Victor remembered how his uncle had nursed *him* when he was ill and morbid and irritable, how he had forgiven him and loved him as tenderly as ever, not-

withstanding the shameful insult with which, in one mad moment, he had repaid the kindness of a life-time. "And what a brute I should be, if I could not be patient with poor Stansfield!"

One night, peculiarly close and sultry—for though the time was the month of March, the place was Marseilles—the tall windows all stood open, but no sea-breeze, only at times the fetid odours of the foul splendid city, where, they say, cholera is endèmic, were wafted into the room; there was scarcely a sound out of doors, only an occasional footfall on the pavement, or a carriage with silvery bells rattled past; the lamp burned unwavering in the still night air. Victor sat reading by Stansfield's bedside, and Stansfield, who was now slowly and steadily regaining strength of mind and body, lay still and looked at him. He looked at the finely cut young face, the firm, calm, sweet-expressed mouth, shadowed by its golden-brown fringe; the grey, clear, very thoughtful eyes, bent down upon the book—Greek, was it not?—which he was intently studying; he looked at his watchful nurse, who, at his slightest word, was ready to lay aside his book and wait upon him, who never seemed ruffled whatever he could do or say. This was Victor Malreward, that violent, worthless young man, whom he had once threatened to horsewhip.

"How I hate the fellow!" thought Stansfield. He hated him for what he was to Freddy; Freddy had always found a charm, a delight, a freedom from mental restraint in her brother's society, which she never did in her husband's, and now he was forced to lie helpless and watch them—this brother and sister, whom he had sworn to part; to watch them aiding, cheering, sympathising with each other, while he was as dependent as a baby upon them both. He hated Victor for what he was himself; for being cultured, scholarly, bookish, instead of being a hard-headed, utilitarian man of business as he was; there was a certain fineness and fastidiousness about Victor, which Stansfield sneered at, as being fit only for a woman; Stansfield was half animal, and Victor seemed more than two-thirds spiritual; Stansfield was steadfast and stolid, and somewhat sensual, Victor was sensitive, imaginative, and passionate. He hated Victor for being here; what business had he to wait upon him, to sit up with him at nights, to anticipate his wants, to see to his medicine, his food, his drink; to humble him, to force him to be dependent upon him, to take a mean revenge upon him—a man who was an invalid, and could not defend himself and kick him out of the place.

And so Stansfield worked himself up into a

mental fever, and then longed for some lemonade, and determined to go without it rather than ask Victor for it. Which determination lasted about five minutes, and then the invalid gave a great impatient sigh; upon which Victor instantly looked up from his book, and Stansfield had to succumb, and to allow Victor to fulfil the Scriptural command—"If thine enemy thirst, give him drink."

After all, Stansfield had hardly gone down to the root of what was the matter with him. He hated Victor because he had harmed him; and, as we all know, it is far easier to forgive those who have injured us, than those whom we have injured. Hence, while Victor, having the lighter part to play, was calm, patient, even tender, towards Stansfield; Stansfield really delayed his own recovery by indulging ill feelings towards Victor. A troubled conscience, like a weak digestion, will often produce irritability of the whole nervous system; and one day the doctor, subtle, keen-eyed Frenchman, told Victor that he believed Monsieur Erle had something troubling his mind; could not Monsieur *son frère* aid him in any way? Monsieur *son frère* shook his head, coloured slightly, and began to wonder if he were doing Stansfield harm by remaining with him. "If it were not for Freddy I would go home," thought he; "but how can I

leave her, so far from strong as she is, with the sole charge of a sick man?"

Next day, on Victor's returning from an hour's constitutional, Freddy whispered to him, while Stansfield was asleep, that her husband had been finding great fault with her because she did not arrange his pillows so comfortably as Victor did. "I am not a bit jealous, dear, I am so glad!" And then the brother and sister smiled, understanding each other without the need of another word. When Stansfield awoke, and Freddy went to his bedside to give him his medicine, she accidentally let the spoon fall.

"How clumsy you are, my pet," he said fretfully; "better let Victor do it, after all." And as Freddy retreated, and Victor came forward, she, in passing, gave his hand a little triumphant squeeze. So by degrees—whether he really wished to spare his wife, or whether he found Victor, being stronger than Freddy, a more competent nurse, I cannot tell, for sick men are notoriously selfish—by degrees Stansfield's constant cry was, "Go and rest, my love, you are quite knocked up. Victor will look after me."

A few nights afterwards Victor was sitting beside Stansfield as usual, but not, as usual, studying; he was sitting with his head resting upon his hand, and seemed lost in deep and

solemn thought. Stansfield had been watching him for some time past, and wondering what he was thinking about so earnestly. At last the invalid abruptly exclaimed, "I wonder what on earth made you come here, all these hundreds of miles, to this stifling, vile-smelling hole? I would not let Frederica nurse you when you were ill."

"Stansfield," and Victor looked round with his sweet, grave smile, "you must forgive me for coming to you against your will. Freddy is not strong enough to have the entire charge of you. If you wish me to do so, I will leave you as soon as you are well enough."

"Oh! well," and Stansfield's tone grew a little more gracious, "you have been an uncommonly good fellow to come, I must say."

"When you are able," Victor went on, and suddenly his voice began to tremble a good deal, "I shall ask you to read a letter which I have received to-day. It has been forwarded to me from Malreward Court. It is a letter from America, from Mark Deverell. It came enclosed in another from a clergyman, to tell me that he—my brother, was dead." Victor paused a moment, while Stansfield looked startled and interested. Then he went on, in the same low, agitated tone, "I want you to read these letters by-and-by. It is possible that when you have done so, you may forgive my being here. At

all events, these letters are my last hope of being able to clear myself to you of all suspicion of causing my father's death."

"I should like to see those letters at once," said Stansfield, eagerly, the lawyer's instinct for hunting out evidence reviving strongly within him.

Victor took a letter out of his pocket-book and silently handed it to his brother-in-law, who looked at it attentively a minute, then gave it back to Victor, saying, in rather an irritable tone, for his state of weakness and dependence galled Stansfield, "Just read it to me, will you? It is Deverell's handwriting, I can swear to that," he muttered to himself.

So, in a low, earnest, slightly tremulous voice, Victor read the following. It was addressed from a small town in one of the North-Western States.

"MY DEAR MR. VICTOR,—When you receive this letter you will know that I am no longer in the world, to be a disgrace and a trouble to you. One of the kindest friends a man could have, Mr. Dallas, who is a clergyman here, and who has constantly been to see me since I have been laid upon this bed, which I shall never leave till I am carried out in my coffin, has promised to send these lines to you, and a few others that I have written to Lucy Alresford, as soon as the

breath is out of my body. It is three weeks ago, come Monday, that, as I was felling a tree, one of the branches somehow came down upon me. My spine was hurt, and my lower limbs have been paralyzed ever since. They say I cannot linger on much longer now. What I suffer at times no one can ever guess ; but, dear Mr. Victor, I can thank God for it all. You will not wonder at my saying this when I have told you all that I have to tell you.

“Do you remember the evening of the 6th of October, the year before last ? I was out shooting in Southwood, as light of heart and clear of conscience as ever I have been in my life. I was thinking about my wife that was to have been—you know the 25th of that month was fixed for my wedding-day. All of a sudden I came upon Mr. Malreward. The mere sight of him nearly knocked me down, for I had thought he was safe on the Continent. I soon found out why he wanted me. He insisted that I should give up the farm which you and Mr. Erle had promised me, rent free. I refused, of course ; and then he swore he would make me give up my sweetheart, if I would not the farm. And then he said something about me and my Lucy. I won't judge him now, sir, but it seemed to me that night as though a devil were speaking. I went quite mad. I raised my hand, and then——

"I call God to witness, sir, that I never for one moment remembered where we were standing—that it was at the very edge of the old quarry below Southwood. He went crashing down through the bushes, there was a heavy fall, and then everything was quite still. I clambered down to him as soon as ever I could. I was sober enough then. But I knew at the very first moment how it would be. When I got to him, he was dead. I had killed him—my father.

"All in one minute there came rushing into my mind every kind word he had ever said to me, every kind thing he had ever done for me, and I felt as though I loved him, my father, and there he was, quite dead, and I had killed him. At the first, I thought I would thankfully give myself up to the police, and be tried and hanged for it. But life is sweet, they say—not that I have found it so—and after a bit I got horribly frightened, and thought I would try to get clear away; but I had been sitting by him so long, in a sort of stupid state, that I found, when I looked at my watch, that the last train that night was gone. I might have got off the next morning, but I was all so scared and confused, I thought I should be sure to be found out and taken up, if I was to be seen by any one I knew going away by train in the day-

time, so I made up my mind it was safer to stop till the next night. I left him lying in the quarry—it was a place lonely and disused, you remember ; and where he was, not a soul could see him from the lane, or from the wood above ; no one could see him till they went close up to him ; and he might have lain there for years before he was found.

“There is no need for me to say much about that next day. I only know there *cannot* be, in the whole universe, anything worse to go through—even for such a man as I am. Do you remember how you came into the lodge that evening, just as I was starting ? I have not forgotten any word that you said, Mr. Victor—you in your kindness and your innocence, like a far-off angel compared to me ! Ah ! how I have cared for you, God only knows !”

“When I got safe here, to America, and found work, as I did at once, upon a farm ; now, thought I, I shall be able to breathe again, and have some comfort of my life. No such thing. I could hardly eat or sleep for wanting to get news from home, for wondering whether the body had been found, and whether you knew, and Lucy knew—about me. There was an Englishman here I came to know very well, and he often lent me a London paper. One day I saw a paragraph in an old *Times*, headed,

‘Mysterious Death of a Gentleman.’ I caught Mr. Malreward’s name, and then—as soon as I was able to read it, which I could not at first, for very fright—I saw that he had been found, and that the coroner’s jury had returned an open verdict, criminating no one. Now, thought I once more, I may be at peace. But I never was.

“Not till I came to lie here, unable to move the lower half of my body, in awful tortures much of my time—and then I have had just a feeble glimmer of what peace may mean. For God, so kind and just as He is, will not keep on punishing us just for the sake of punishing, will He? No good *man* would do it; and I think that in the end—a very long way off—but still in the end, there may be a hope for me. Anyhow, I thank God for all this pain which I am suffering, because it looks as though He had not given me up even now, but meant to make me a better man, somehow, before He had done with me. ‘The world will not believe a man repents;’ how many a time have I thought of those words whilst I have been lying here! Death-bed repentances are so easy, people say. Ah, well, perhaps you will believe that I repent—perhaps God will——

“I could not finish this yesterday. I am very nearly done for. It will not be long before you

read this letter, I think. Just this once let me say it—I am a dying man—My brother, my darling brother, my brother Victor, good-bye.

“I remain, sir,

“Your humble servant,

“MARK DEVERELL.”

Victor came to a pause altogether once or twice whilst reading this letter. “I cannot read it quite all,” he said, in a stifled voice. “But you can see it for yourself when you wish to do so.”

“Never mind, Victor; I understand,” answered Stansfield, with unwonted gentleness. Then Victor read the accompanying letter from Mr. Dallas, the clergyman who had visited Deverell on his death-bed. It stated briefly that the latter was at last at rest, and that, according to his wish, he now forwarded to his friends in England the letters he had written a few days before his death; and that he had every reason to believe that the writer of those letters had died a true penitent, trusting in the only Hope for contrite sinners.

After that there was what seemed to Victor a very long and awful silence in the half-darkened room. He sat quite still, with his hands clasped upon the letters; his face was very pale; his heart throbbed painfully; he could

not even look at Stansfield, but he felt as if life or death depended upon his answer. He heard through the open window the voices of some late passers-by; a carriage rolled along, little bells tinkled; every sound seemed startlingly distinct. At last Stansfield spoke—"Yes, I always said that Deverell did it. I suppose, Victor, you will write to this parson—what's his name?—Dallas, to find out whether such a man does really exist, and whether his story about Deverell is a true one?"

"Of course I shall write to him," replied Victor.

Another silence; then Stansfield repeated, in a low, uneasy tone—"‘The world will not believe a man repents.’ Where does that line come from, do you know?"

"I do not know—Tennyson, I think. What does it matter?" Victor tried not to answer sharply, but he felt as though his disappointment were more than he knew how to bear. So it was all over, then, his last hope of reconciliation with Stansfield—of clearing himself to the world. Perhaps he had been a fool to expect such results from Deverell's confession. The world would naturally say that it was easy for one accomplice in a crime to bribe another to keep out of the way, and to take the whole guilt upon his own shoulders. Well, he would

think no more about himself, and how this confession might have affected his own vain hopes. He would think only of Deverell; the passionate heart for ever stilled, the guilty soul absolved, and though stained with many a sin, dearest brother, truest friend, lost to him—but not for ever. “For if I loved him as I did, in spite of all,” thought Victor, “must not God love him infinitely more? And to His mercy I confide him now and ever. Sinner as he was, it may be there are seeming saints who need God’s mercy more.”

Stansfield scarcely spoke another word throughout that night; he slept fitfully, and when he was awake, he seemed disinclined to talk. All the next day he was very silent, more than ever restless and uneasy; once or twice he thanked his brother-in-law almost tenderly, and yet as if half against his will, for Victor’s usual little services. Towards evening Freddy suddenly remarked—“Oh Stansfield, this morning, while you were asleep, the English chaplain called; he said he had only just heard that there was a sick English gentleman here. I thanked him, of course, and said that just then you were asleep, and I could not disturb you, but that we should be very glad to see him, if he would kindly come again to-morrow.”

“Well, but I don’t know that I want to see

him," said Stansfield, in rather a gruff tone—"not professionally, that is. What would he say and do if I were to let him come?—read the service for the visitation of the sick over me, I suppose—that is the correct thing, is it not?"

"Probably he would do so," answered Victor.

"Then I tell you what, I will not have it done without knowing all about it beforehand. I will not commit myself to anything," said Stansfield, lawyer-like to the last. "Will you have the goodness to read the service to me, Victor, that I may know what would be expected of me?"

To Stansfield this seemed the most simple, business-like precaution. He was hardly prepared for the solemn manner in which Victor carried out his wish. Side by side, holding a Church-service between them, the brother and sister knelt down by Stansfield's bed. Victor repeated the part of the service for the visitation of the sick which the priest reads, while Freddy repeated the responses.

Victor read on until he came to this rubric—

"Then shall the minister examine whether he repent him truly of his sins, and be in charity with all the world, exhorting him to forgive from the bottom of his heart all persons that have offended him; and if he hath offended any

other, to ask them forgiveness; and where he hath done injury or wrong to any man, that he make amends to the uttermost of his power."

Stansfield suddenly raised his hand. "Stop there, please, Victor. There is no use in going on." Then once more there was a dead silence in the room. Victor and Freddy kept their eyes fixed upon the prayer-book; it shook violently between their hands. At last Stansfield spoke; they scarcely knew his voice—it was hoarse, trembling, broken.

"Victor, it is you whom I have wronged and injured almost ever since I first knew you! I always disliked you—I suppose because you are really a better man than I am; and then I was jealous of you; it seems so odd to me now, but I fancied that Freddy cared more for her brother than she did for her husband."

"Oh Stansfield!" cried Freddy; then, not knowing what to say, she laid the prayer-book down, and hid her face on her husband's pillow. He put his arm round her and went on—

"Then, when your father's dead body was found, and it came out at the inquest that you had had a quarrel with him just before, I believed, or, rather, I gratified myself by trying to believe, that you had a guilty understanding with Mark Deverell. Of course, long before his letter came, I believed him to be the actual

criminal. And then I forbade my wife to go to you, although I knew you were ill, half out of your mind with trouble, just because I was jealous of her affection for you. And that is not all, for when you came here first, I hated you for coming, for nursing me, and sitting up at night with me. I could have sworn at you often, because you were always kind and patient, whatever I said or did ; but you went on being kind to me all the same—the man who had done everything he could to injure you.”

And then the once strong hard man burst into tears. Victor heard him silently to the end, he would not interrupt Stansfield's effort to unburden his conscience, but he remained kneeling, it seemed to him the fit attitude in which to receive the confession of a fellow-creature who had wronged him, whilst he himself had, as every human being has, far more need to ask the forgiveness of God. But now, as Stansfield sobbed out, “Can you forgive me, can you possibly forgive me, when I have tried to do you all the harm I could ?” Victor started up, flung his arms round Stansfield's neck, and kissed him.

“Forgive you, of course I do, dear old fellow. If you only knew how much there was for which I need forgiveness ! And I did use rather strong language to you once, if you remember ; but we

are brothers now, are we not? And everything else is just as if it had never been."

"Ah Victor," Stansfield tried to smile, as he lay holding Victor's hand fast in his, and looking up into Victor's face, "how those words poor Deverell quoted in his letter have been running in my head ever since, 'The world will not believe a man repents,' and I was afraid that you would not believe it either. But if, in God's mercy I get well again, and go home to England, I will do all I can to make the world believe it. Only I am sometimes inclined to doubt whether I shall ever have the chance. There is always the danger of a relapse in this Roman fever. I have had one, and another would pretty well finish me."

A faint cry burst from Freddy's lips, and her husband turned to her with a loving look. Victor left them alone together, and went quietly out of the room. It was no place for him just then. "My own little wife," said Stansfield, "you too will forgive me, will you not? I have been very selfish to you sometimes, I see that now, always wanting my own way about everything. If I had listened to you when you begged me not to stay out so late on the Campagna, I should not have been ill; but I thought I must know better than my wife. You will forgive me, will you not, my pet?"

"Oh! Stansfield, my own, will you ever forgive *me*?" cried Freddy, with her head upon his breast, and her arms clasped round his neck. "Think of those cruel, wicked things I said to you that night, when——"

"When I took you away from poor Victor, you mean." And then he kissed her, with such loving words, that no doubt could be left in Freddy's mind that she was forgiven. The husband and wife seemed to have become one at last. But it was Stansfield who had been humbled, and made to submit, Stansfield who had become helpless and dependent. "For there is no respect of persons with God."

"Yes," the husband went on presently, "I was a brute that night, and no mistake. How you begged and prayed me to let you stay with Victor whilst he was so ill, and in such trouble, and I would not. I remember the satisfaction I felt in tearing you away from him by main force, and the contempt I had for him because he was not so strong as myself. Well, he could do pretty much as he liked with me now, pitch me out of window, I think. What a good, kind fellow he is, to be sure! He has not left me alone in my illness as I left him. I never knew before that a man could be so patient and gentle as he is, or that a woman could be so sensible as you are, and so strong-minded. No, no, I

did not mean that," and he made a wry face.

"And would you prefer my being weak-minded, dear?" asked Freddy, smiling.

"Well, no—not when I am ill." For Stansfield was beginning to discover that however charming to a man dolls may be, when the sun shines and all goes smoothly, they are not calculated to stand the wear and tear of life.

"Now, my dearest, do not talk any more, try and go to sleep," said his wife.

So Stansfield, still with Freddy's hand clasped in his, closed his eyes for a few minutes, and lay still. Then he looked up again. "Freddy, do you remember the psalm which begins 'Blessed is he whose unrighteousness is forgiven, and whose sin is covered?' Victor was reading it aloud the other evening. It came in the regular course, you know, and I cannot describe to you the sort of savage feeling that psalm gave me. For, you see, I knew all the time that I had wronged him, but I could not make up my mind to tell him so. And then came Deverell's letter. I suppose Victor has told you all about that, Freddy?" She replied, "Yes," and her husband went on, "Deverell confessed, you see, and I would not, and I felt as though I hated Victor for every little kind thing he did for me, 'heaping coals of fire on your enemy's head,' don't you know! Well, I have told him everything

at last, and he has forgiven me, and I feel so happy—I cannot tell you how happy I feel. It is just as though a great iron weight had been taken off my mind. I know exactly now what that psalm means.”

“Would you like to see the chaplain to-morrow, if he calls?” Freddy ventured to ask.

“Yes, I shall be very glad to see him. If I have to die, I shall be able to die in peace with God and man, I think. But I begin to believe I shall get well.” And then, with a placid smile on his face, Stansfield fell fast asleep.

Being Englishmen, Victor and Stansfield never again referred to their reconciliation, or to the demonstration of brotherly affection which had passed between them. Only the invalid’s eyes would often rest upon Victor with quite a new expression in them, a sort of tender, remorseful look, and he was often turning over in his mind how he could show his gratitude.

“Victor,” he said, one day, “I am awfully sorry about Helen, though I was not to blame there; it was entirely her own doing breaking it off with you. If I could do anything to bring you together again, I would do it, with all my heart, I am sure.”

Victor made no answer, he could find no words delicate enough, in which to tell her brother that his love for Helen—or rather the Helen that he

had loved—no longer existed. "The man's love once gone, never returns."

"But, as perhaps you have heard, she is just going to be married to Charles Heathcote, the banker. He is fabulously rich, you know," said Stansfield, as if making an apology for her.

"Yes," replied Victor, very calmly, "I knew that she was going to be married. I hope she will be happy."

"Well, you were engaged such a short time that I hope the wound was not a very deep one. Eh, Victor?"

"We need not discuss the matter, I think," and Victor took up a book. Stansfield's obtuse kindness was almost more than he could stand. Victor had heard something of Mr. Heathcote, not to his credit. But what did his past history matter to Helen Erle, who always made that profession of ignorance of evil which is so useful to women who wish to marry, and to marry well—enabling them to call black sheep white ones. "Whosoever will be socially saved," thought Victor, "before all things it is necessary that he do not shock the decorum of the British public. We Malrewards, whatever we do, always manage to become *anathema maranatha*."

There could be little real sympathy between Victor and Stansfield; but there was something just now in their peculiar relationship, which

caused them to have a hearty regard for each other. Victor could not but feel a certain affection for the man who was as dependent upon him as a child ; and Stansfield never forgot how he had deprived Victor, during his illness, of all those little cares and tendernesses which Victor, now bestowed upon him.

And now the burden having been removed from his conscience, Stansfield began steadily to recover. The doctor advised his patient to leave Marseilles for a cooler climate as soon as possible. In the hope of giving him a little strength to bear the journey to England, he was now every morning dressed, carried downstairs by Victor and one of the garçons of the hotel, and put into a carriage. They drove along the Prado, the road skirting the Mediterranean, with a great blazing sapphire of a sea by their side. But it was all rather scorching and glaring. Stansfield complained of the sunlight, and sighed, "Oh for a shady green English lane ! I never cared about them before." Here were dust and sickening smells, stifling heat and scorching pavements, the clamour of a great city ; at home were cool emerald grass, primrosed banks, pearly skies, April showers, the song of the blackbird and thrush. "I cannot breathe, the air seems to poison me," said the invalid ; "and there is a cemetery at Marseilles which is always

haunting me—an awful cemetery, at the top of a long hill, ankle deep in white dust, the very cypresses white with it instead of black, and wreaths of those yellow dried-up things—*immortelles*, everywhere. A blinding, scorching, dismal place. I have been thinking of it all through my illness, and how hot and dreary it would be to lie there.”

“Don’t think of it any more, then, my dearest,” said his wife; “are we not all going home to-morrow?”

Freddy sat beside her pallid, hollow-eyed, yet convalescent and cheerful husband, with her hand locked in his, and looked at Victor, who sat on the opposite seat of the carriage, carefully shading Stansfield from the sun with a white umbrella. Victor had regained something of the bright look of his boyhood, and a dear and delightful sight was he to Freddy, in one of his usual grey costumes, with muslin puggeree round his straw hat, reminding her of the old Oxford days. And as she remembered they were all starting for England to-morrow, it seemed to her as though her cup of joy were full. “I am the happiest woman in the world, I think,” and she gave a little ecstatic sigh. “If you were only quite well and strong again, Stansfield, I should have nothing left to wish for.”

“And have you forgotten all about your son, my lady?” asked her husband, smiling.

"Indeed I have not, nor have you either, I hope. But when I get almost daily accounts from Mrs. Northey that he is fat and flourishing, I may be forgiven for bestowing most of my thoughts upon his father, who at present is just the reverse. Still, I think he looks a great deal better to-day; don't you, Victor?"

Victor assented heartily, "Dear old fellow, you will pick up again so wonderfully fast when you get back to England, we shall not know you."

"Talking of our son," said Stansfield, "he will have to be re-christened, or received into the Church, or something of the kind, won't he, Freddy? And there will be godfathers and godmothers to be chosen, I suppose. May I hope that you will be godfather, Victor? I suppose you know that my dear little wife has already bestowed your name upon our boy?"

Freddy involuntarily pressed her husband's hand. The marvellous change in the feelings towards each other of the two people she loved best in the world, almost overwhelmed her with joy.

Victor flushed up, his face beamed; he answered with a slight tremor in his voice, "I shall be delighted to be your son's godfather. Thank you, Stansfield."

The following day, husband, wife, and brother left Marseilles.

CHAPTER XII.

For work is the great cure of all the maladies and miseries which beset mankind—honest work, which you intend getting done.—CARLYLE.

BUT Stansfield did not recover so speedily as they hoped he would have done. It was full six months from the time that he was first taken ill at Rome, before he was able to go back to his office. The fever had left his brain so weak, that he was for a long while unfit for anything in the shape of work. All through that summer he spent as many hours in the open air as possible; driven by Freddy in her pony-carriage into the country, spending the day in the woods and fields, Stansfield lying on a rug beneath a tree, whilst Freddy sat by his side and talked with him, or read aloud some amusing book. Sometimes they would drive in the direction of Malreward Park, and Victor would join them for an hour or two, and they would lunch with him in the keeper's lodge; or he would return with them to Donnistone for the evening. Those were happy days. The husband and wife had each been very near

death during the past year, and now it seemed as though they could not prize each other enough.

His illness had an effect upon Stansfield which endured more or less for the whole of his after-life. "I don't much believe in death-bed repentances, or in sick men's resolutions," he said one day to Victor; "but a long illness must alter one somehow. It gives one time to think, to look at life as a whole, to consider the past and the future, instead of always existing in the present moment. A man like me, whose two great aims in life were to get on in his profession, and to have a comfortable home, and a pretty wife to return to when the day's work was done, when he gets laid aside for half a year—particularly if he has never had a day's illness before in his life, which is my case—he must necessarily get a few fresh ideas put into his head, and begin to think about something besides and beyond the routine of his daily life."

To Victor and to Stansfield, the discipline of life had been of exactly opposite characters. To the former, a naturally dreamy, morbid, imaginative man, had come the "gospel of work;" to the latter, a narrow, hard-headed, practical man, had come the "gospel of leisure." Victor had been taught by enforced hard labour to have faith in himself, to have faith—that

with God's help he should be able to atone for his father's wrong doings, and to overcome the violent passions which beset his family. Stansfield had been taught—by opportunity for thought and reflection, by enforced inactivity and dependance, the direct consequence of his own obstinacy and self-conceit—to doubt himself, to doubt whether his own will invariably ran parallel to the laws which govern the world; and whether his own opinions were derived from a private source of infallibility.

A little incident which occurred during that summer likewise tended to humble Stansfield. He had been receiving many letters from Cornwall lately. Freddy noticed that he seemed worried and anxious; at last he began to complain of his head. "Would she—" he hesitated a little—he could not bear troubling ladies with business matters, he said, but "would she mind writing a letter from his dictation; it was just possible she could help him with the wording of it too, his brain seemed so confused."

"Why, my dearest," replied his wife, "you know that I shall be delighted to help you at any time, if you will only let me. Think how thoroughly I have gone into business matters with Victor—I know all about the affairs of his estate."

"Ah, yes, Victor." A slight shadow passed

over Stansfield's face. It was not exactly his old jealousy—it was rather a dim perception of what it was that his wife found so exciting and so delightful in the society of her brother. “Victor always talks to you as though you were another man. To hear you discussing his Oxford life, one would think you had been an undergraduate yourself; and when once you get on the topic of the Malreward estate, I am lost in amazement—that is all. I should never dream of boring my sister or my wife with talk of farming, or building, or anything of that kind.”

“How I wish you would,” said Freddy; and then, with great alacrity, she began to be her husband's secretary. Being thus forced to take her into his confidence, by-and-by the whole truth came out. He had been speculating (to no very large amount, certainly) in Cornish mines, and the speculation had proved a failure. “I am afraid we ought to part with one of the horses; and not give quite so many parties; and be a little economical for a year or two. Will you mind very much, my pet?”

“I shall not mind one atom, dearest. I care for nothing but to see you quite well and strong again. Oh, I will economize beautifully in my dress, and in our household expenses; and I promise that you shall never find it out.”

Stansfield looked greatly relieved, and began to dictate another letter. Some names therein mentioned struck Freddy's ear as being familiar, and presently she uttered a sudden exclamation, "I remember, I remember all about it now! Why, Stansfield—" and then she went on rapidly to tell him what she had known through her frequent visits to Tregalva, and her many Cornish friends, of the reputation of some of the Directors of the mining company in which Stansfield had taken shares. If Stansfield had told his wife when they were first married of his intention of taking those shares, she, by her knowledge gained from a source to which he had not access, could have warned him against doing so.

"What a thundering fool I have been!" the confession burst involuntarily from the lawyer's lips. "And yet I went most cautiously to work; I made every enquiry a man could do. Well, it cannot be helped now."

The loss of £2,000 was a constant and a sharp reminder that Stansfield might do worse than take his wife's opinion; and the fact of his dependence upon her assistance in letter-writing, in various little ways, during so many months, forced him into taking her more into his confidence than he had ever done before. He began to realize the fact that Freddy was not only

capable of taking care of herself, but of her husband also, if required. "What should I do without you, my treasure? You are a help to me in everyway," the once haughty, self-willed Stansfield was at last reduced into saying. It was a terrible downfall to his pride, no doubt; but he consoled himself by reflecting that Freddy was an exception to all the rest of her sex, and that consequently he had shown his own superior wisdom by choosing her to be his wife. Still even this belief necessarily became modified in time. As Freddy had once said, men always judge women according to those specimens of the female sex which they have known most intimately. Therefore—given a man's ideas about women, and you may easily discover the sort of company he has kept and what his mother, wife or sisters are like. Stansfield had heretofore judged all women by the standard of his foolish, worldly-minded mother and sisters; now he began to look at them through the medium of his wife's cultured and liberal opinions. "As one sees more of women, one believes that with a more sensible kind of training they might become a little less inferior to us than they are. But still I shall always think they are a great deal better by nature than we are," said this member of the logical sex, all unconscious of the bull he was perpetrating.

As the years went on, Stansfield and Freddy influenced each other more, and grew more like each other. Freddy learnt from him the lesson which all the Malrewards sorely needed to learn—to be calm, to control herself, to crave less for pleasure, for intellectual excitement. And from his wife Stansfield learnt toleration, unselfishness, respect for those weaker than himself; perhaps, also, a lesson peculiarly hard for him with his early training to learn—that every adult human being, without distinction of race, class, or sex, has an equal right to freedom of thought and action. Stansfield had come by degrees to feel for his wife true love; and true love means sympathy, consideration, respect, *anything* rather than the passion which is commonly dignified with that name; he consulted her more, and interfered with her less, and on the whole the marriage might have been considered a happy one. Only it was not, and never could be, the highest kind of marriage, which was but just, for they had not married from the highest motive, oneness of mind and soul.

And now to return to Victor. I have left myself but a few pages in which to speak of that work for which all his former life was but a preparation. His early youth was eventful, tragic, full of light and shade, raptures of grief



and joy ; his manhood was calm, equable, even monotonous, full of labour, but marked by not one single striking epoch. But is not this only in accordance with the ordinary rule of life ? Our training for that which is our appointed work is of divers sorts, and comes to us from divers events and divers influences ; it may be stern, it may be gentle, it will probably be a mingling of many kinds of training. But the work itself is often done in silence, and is a matter apparently of the most humdrum daily routine. Sun and rain, dew and frost, "stormy wind fulfilling His word," prepare the earth for the seed ; but the seed itself grows in darkness and secrecy, we know not how.

On their return from France, Victor left Freddy and Stansfield comfortably established at Arbutus Villa, and went home to the keeper's lodge. He felt very forlorn at first ; he began to realize now that the wild hope which he had long been cherishing, that Deverell was innocent, that some day he would return to England, to his home at the farm which Victor was going to give him, to his betrothed wife, Lucy Alresford, that this hope was for ever at an end. Deverell would never come back to him, to cheer up his sad heart again. Deverell was dead—was lying in an uncared-for grave in a far-off foreign land ; and Lucy Alresford, they

said, had never recovered the loss of her lover, but was fast going into a decline.

Victor often thought of Deverell in those long lonely evenings. Deverell was the dark, yet faithful mirror in which he could see himself, what he might still be, if he ever relaxed his stern self-rule. Many a time did his old prayer rise to Victor's lips—"Let me bear all the sorrows of my house, so that I may be saved from its sins." And many a time did a stern, yet tender whisper seem to answer him—"The sorrows which you have borne, and which you still must bear, are a pledge of that salvation for which you have prayed."

For there never came to Victor, as there comes to some falsely-accused, but happier men, a grand *dénouement* and clearing up of his character. It was one of the severe lessons which Stansfield Erle was taught, that it is an easier thing to make mischief than to undo it when done—that it is easier, by little hints and inuendoes, to take away a man's or woman's good name, than, by loud declarations of their innocence, to restore it to them again. Stansfield might often be seen riding with his brother-in-law, or ostentatiously walking arm-in-arm with him; he might go about to all his friends and acquaintances, and assure them that he had been mistaken, that Deverell had made

a full dying confession of having been the murderer of his old master, and that young Malreward was the finest fellow in the world ; but people only smiled and sneered and shrugged their shoulders, and said behind Stansfield's back, "Oh yes, Erle finds he has made a mistake, no doubt. Young Malreward is going to make a good thing out of his estate, and it would be a pity to throw away the professional connection. Erle has lost money lately, you know, and his family is increasing, so he cannot afford to be squeamish ; and it is natural that his wife should try to make the best of her brother, as they are forced to live in the same neighbourhood. I only hope Erle will not ask us to his house to meet young Malreward, that is all. No, no ; he is not quite such a fool."

Whatever disappointment and mortification Victor might suffer in his secret heart, he ever bore himself patiently and cheerfully to Stansfield and to the world generally. And at last Stansfield, finding all his efforts to reinstate Victor were in vain—that people persisted in cutting him, in refusing to meet him—finding it in vain to storm or sulk at the world's stupidity, whilst Victor only smiled and worked the harder—Stansfield suddenly comforted himself, and told Freddy—"Well, after all, Victor is such a learned, bookish sort of fellow, that I

dare say he does not care much about going into society, and is rather thankful than otherwise that people leave him alone."

Freddy made no answer; she could not altogether take that view of the case. "Never mind," had been Victor's quiet remark to her, "I always knew in my more reasonable moments that Deverell's confession could really affect my position very little. There never was, and never can be, anything else for me than just to 'live it down.' If I attain my threescore and ten, I shall have plenty of time in which to do it. I am only four-and-twenty even now,"—and then he stifled a sigh. "I am quieted down, you see, and do not expect so much of the world as I did once."

No doubt his almost entire exclusion from society was favourable to the amount of hard reading which he accomplished during the year which elapsed between his leaving Oxford and his going up again for his final examination. But the success which attended him at Moderations was not to be repeated. He wrote a most melancholy letter from Oxford to the Rector of Tregalva, to tell him that, notwithstanding he had worked his utmost, his university career had ended in utter failure, and his name had come out in the second-class. Arthur Byrne sent him a very jolly sort of reply; rated him

soundly for his morbidness and discontent, and said that, considering all he had gone through, and all he had to attend to during the past year, he was far prouder of his taking a Second, than as if he had stayed in Oxford with nothing to do but to read, and had gained a Double First.

The spring following his journey to Marseilles, Victor succeeded in letting Malreward Court, with the park and shooting, at £400 a year, to a Mr. Hobson, a retired manufacturer, with a grown up family. This Mr. Hobson came into the neighbourhood quite unacquainted with the scandal about the owner of Malreward Court, and when it reached his ears he simply remarked that he judged people as he found them. He was a good deal struck with the oddity of the young Squire, his landlord, living in a cottage in order that he might save money to improve his estate. "People said he was doing penance for killing his father, the old Squire, did they? Humbug! Mr. Malreward was a remarkably sensible young man, and he wished that all the lot of bloated aristocrats with impoverished estates that there were about the country, would take a lesson from him."

Mr. Hobson was very civil to Victor, begged him still to walk in the park as much as he pleased, to shoot with him, and to dine at the

Court whenever he could spare time. Victor thanked him heartily, declined the shooting, asked only that he might be allowed to keep the key of the little sequestered garden which had been his mother's, and now and then accepted an invitation to dinner. Mr. Hobson's pretty daughters at first paid him many attentions; his living at the keeper's lodge whilst they were at the Court seemed to them so charmingly romantic. But they soon found, to their disgust, that his mind and disposition did not harmonize with his exterior, with that aristocratic, melancholy, beauty which they had thought especially intended for their benefit, by giving them an object of interest in this dull out-of-the-way place, which they were always reviling their "governor" for taking. All their blandishments glanced off from that armour of calm, and even cold and stern reserve which had come round Victor since his isolation from the world. When the Miss Hobsons occasionally met him in the park, and they were blushing and giggling with excitement, he would simply take off his hat, in that new-fashioned manner which they thought so "sweetly deferential," and walk on without a word. And whatever might have been the follies of his youth, he now heartily despised dancing and croquet, and he preferred talking to Mr. Hobson about the

most outrageously dry subjects, farming, politics, and the like, to hanging over the piano whilst the young ladies played, sang, and made eyes at him.

It seemed as though the great shock of his life, the discovery of Helen's falseness, had hardened Victor even to far higher feminine attractions than these.

"This will be the next Victor at Malreward Court," said he one day, as he took Freddy's little son up into his arms.

"Victor, how can you talk so absurdly?" cried Freddy, quite in anger.

Victor smiled a little dreamily. "I do not know why I said it, I am sure; only that I have often felt as though it would be so. I shall marry some day, I daresay; that is, if I can find any woman to have me—a man under a cloud. Only I am quite sure I have not yet seen my future wife. Having such a sister as mine makes a man fastidious. Besides, I shall have no time to think of anything of the kind for years to come, and there is never any knowing what may happen."

Freddy snatched away her child from him. "I will not have you talk in that dismal way with my boy in your arms; it is quite unlucky; you will bring some dreadful doom upon him."

"Ah no, dear!" and again Victor smiled.

"The Malreward curse will die with me, I hope. Anyhow, Stansfield's son cannot inherit it. Stansfield is too good a man for that to be possible."

"Darling old fellow," said Freddy; "if I could only see you with a wife and child of your own, to drive all your sad thoughts away, I should have nothing left to wish for."

But, as Victor said, he was too busy to think of marrying, even if he had met a woman he could have loved. As soon as he had taken his degree, he gave his whole thoughts to the practical work of his estate. Four days in every week for a whole year, he went a short railway journey to learn agriculture, under one of those great Wiltshire farmers, who are to the farmers of Somerset, his own county, what a Q.C. is to a pettifogging attorney. Meantime the improvements on his property went on apace. In the first two years of possession, he was able to expend £2,000 out of his income in repairing the Court, the Vicarage, and the schools. During those two years he also expended the entire capital borrowed from Mr. Byrne; £4,200 of it upon improvement of his farmhouses and buildings, £5,000 upon the drainage of a thousand acres, and £1,800 upon the twelve new cottages. Also during these two years he was able to meet with highly satisfactory tenants for his three farms; to them he gave leases for

twenty-one years, at a higher rental than these farms had been let before, their value having been greatly increased by the extensive improvements which he had made. His personal expenditure was rigidly kept down to £300 a year. The current expenses of the estate were also small, in consequence of the buildings being in such thorough repair. Then after also deducting property tax, subscriptions to local charities, interest on borrowed capital, and premium upon life policy, from his yearly income, (which included the rental of Malreward Court, park and shooting, as well as that from the land, pasture, arable, and woodland,) there remained to him a net income of £2,000 a year, available for the restoration of the church, and for repaying his uncle's loan of £11,000.

Then for his labourers Victor built the new cottages, with large plots of garden ground; for them he turned the "Malreward Arms" into a reading-room and coffee-shop, a measure which, grumbled over at first, became generally popular in the end; for them he established a penny bank and a clothing-club, the management of which he persuaded one of the Miss Hobsons to undertake. He could not, indeed, by any artificial means, raise the low standard of wages which prevailed in the district, and which would prevail so long as the supply of unskilled labourers

equalled, or was greater than, the demand; but he did his best to diminish the supply, he assisted three families to emigrate, and in their stead his tenants engaged men who thoroughly understood the working of agricultural machinery. Of course the system of paying wages partly in beer or cider ceased immediately upon the new tenants entering upon their farms.

Meantime Victor's chief pleasures were a visit to Tregalva, a short tour upon the Continent, a few weeks spent in London. There were old Oxford friends to be looked up in different parts of the kingdom, and through them several new friends were made. His family had always been, and he might always be, looked upon with suspicion in the society of their native Somersetshire. But while pompous, thick-headed old Squires, and fast, "horsey" young ones, might consider him unfit for their company—men of cultured tastes, men interested in political and social questions, interested in education, in emigration, in the improvement in the condition of the working classes, and of the condition of women of all classes, in fact, all true Liberals, liked and appreciated him. It was only in his own home, upon his estate, where he studied, and worked, and denied himself all luxuries, and almost all amusements, that Victor Malreward was under a cloud.

In about four years from his coming into possession, thanks to his rigid economy, his energy and perseverance, the chief part of his work upon his estate was done. Everything that required rebuilding and restoration, including the church, was finished and paid for. The land was in a good state of cultivation, and the labourers were as prosperous as any in the west of England. What he had now to do was to repay his uncle the loan of £11,000, and he hoped to clear this off in yearly sums of £2,000, so that by the time Mr. Hobson's seven years' lease was out, he might be able to return to the Court an unfettered man, his father's neglect and mismanagement atoned for, and his own debts paid off to the uttermost farthing. Meanwhile he was now able to let his thoughts take their natural bent towards literature. His curiously varied education, his by no means undistinguished Oxford career, his acquaintance with literary men in London, which, chiefly through his old friend Chetwynd, he had lately made, were all in his favour. In the course of a few years he managed to get on the staff of several well-established but widely differing reviews and magazines. It was one of Freddy's standing jokes against her brother, that an article of his upon the poet Shelley appeared in one of the Quarterlies, during the same month that another

essay of his, upon sewage irrigation, was published in an agricultural journal.

Victor aimed at higher game than this, however; and now that there was nothing at home that particularly required his supervision, he spent several months from time to time in London, reading at the British Museum. And thus, with the help of that valuable collection of pamphlets and newspapers which had belonged to his great-grandfather, he collected materials for the work, the scheme of which had been for many years in his mind, and the subject of which was, "The Progress of Freedom in England during the Nineteenth Century."

Then he proposed to his sister that she should write the chapter of the book which dealt with the improvements in the position of English women. Freddy was enchanted with the idea of entering into partnership with him. "If I can only write it well enough!" she said.

"Of course you can," he answered, "a great deal better than I could. Lions should turn sculptors sometimes, and then perhaps the man would not always get the best of it, eh, Freddy?"

"But what will Stansfield say?" asked Freddy, with a sudden dismay. "Of course I can do it in the mornings, when he is away—he need never be disgusted by the sight of a pen in my hand—

but it is my duty to ask his leave to do it at all, I suppose?"

"I suppose it is," replied Victor.

"Victor, when you are married, will you ask your wife's leave before you begin writing a book? Because, if you have any sense of justice in you, you will do so."

However, Stansfield pronounced by no means the inexorable sentence which both brother and sister feared he would give. After all that had happened in the past, he felt that he could hardly refuse any request of Victor's, however unreasonable it might appear to him. He only laughed a little. "Of course, my love, you can try to write the chapter, if you like; and Victor, if he likes, can put it in his book. I only bargain that your name does not appear on the title-page. Not that I should imagine you would wish it. It is only the most odious and strong-minded of your sex who care for fame for its own sake, if they can get it, which they very seldom do. I do not so much mind a woman writing to help her husband or her brother, if he gets all the credit of it, and the rest of the world knows nothing about it."

Victor looked much amused. He thought, "We shall see."

"And now, I suppose," groaned Stansfield, "I shall have to go without buttons to my

shirts; and the dinner will never be cooked properly; and the children will run about in rags, and my pretty little wife will always be covered with ink, and not fit to be seen."

"Oh! you dear, ridiculous Stansfield!" cried Freddy; "as if you ever wanted me to cook your dinner, or mend your shirts, or make the children's clothes; you know you would be horrified if I interfered with the servants, or did anything menial, as you call it. It is with me half my time an alternative between writing and studying, and yawning over fancy-work and novels."

So Freddy read, and carefully thought over the books with which Victor supplied her; and in due time her chapter, which was about a fourth part of the whole book, was written. She looked through her common-place book, to see whether anything she had there set down was worthy of print; but she decided that it was all written too much in the spirit of a partizan. "I will take no side," she thought. "I will write a plain, unvarnished statement; and the only sarcasm I will allow myself is the severest of all—the sarcasm of facts." The truth of one sentence in her common-place book particularly struck her as having been proved by her own experience.

"Men say that if women were able to com-

pete with them in the domain of intellect and reason, we should weaken the influence we at present possess over them by our beauty, grace, and accomplishments. Exactly; this is just what we want. Natural instincts are quite strong enough to take care of themselves—they want regulating, not stimulating; and every man and woman worth the name will prefer to influence each other through their higher, rather than their lower natures.”

In course of time the book was finished, found a publisher, and made its appearance in the world. Freddy never forgot the glorious day when she received a parcel from her brother, who was at that time in London. It contained two good-sized quarto volumes, well got up, in clear, rather large type. She turned to the title-page. “The Progress of Freedom in England during the Nineteenth Century. By a Brother and Sister.” She put the book down again, almost overwhelmed. Victor had given up making his own name public, because Stansfield would not allow hers to be; he had refused to take credit for having written that share of the work which was his sister’s. “I do not believe there is another man in the world who would have done what my brother has done. How infinitely better than generous he is—how *just*!”

The book soon became widely read; some reviews praised it, some fell foul of it; fortunately none left it unnoticed. In especial Freddy's chapter was both severely criticized and warmly praised; reviewers said her style was not so cultured and scholarly, so elegant and imaginative as that of her brother, but that it was superior to his in point of clear trenchant force. At all events, the joint work was a success, and before long Victor handed over to his sister a fourth part of the profits. Stansfield was thoroughly puzzled and bewildered about the whole matter. A dreadful thought would cross his mind—supposing Freddy were to become a well-known author, and he were to be called "Mrs. Erle's husband!" When he skimmed through the book, Freddy's chapter left an uncomfortable impression upon his mind—it had a tendency to disturb fine old-flavoured prejudices and foregone conclusions. So he paid his wife a great many pretty compliments, gave her a valuable brooch in commemoration of her literary success, and dismissed the matter from his mind.

Nearly eight years since Victor's accession to the Malreward estate had passed away. The Hobsons, the family who had for the last six years tenanted the Court, wished, the spring following Victor's twenty-ninth birthday, to

forfeit the last year of their lease and go abroad. And Victor, having now repaid Mr. Byrne £8,000 of his loan, considered himself justified in taking possession of his house, re-furnishing it by degrees, as he was able. He determined to signalize his return to the Court in a quiet way—he would have a family party, he would invite his tenants to dinner, and finally give an entertainment to all the labourers upon the estate, with their wives and families. By-and-by he said he would fill the Court with his friends—not those county magnates with whom, in the ordinary course of things, the young Squire of Malreward Park would have been supposed to visit; but he wanted to return the hospitality which, during many solitary years, had been shown him by old college friends, by acquaintances in the literary world; and which, hitherto, living in the keeper's lodge, he had been unable to do.

One glorious afternoon, in the month of May, Mrs. Stansfield Erle and her little son drove up to the Court. She found Victor in a black velvet shooting-coat, sitting before a rustic table on the lawn, beneath the trees, writing and smoking with equal diligence. "Ah, Freddy!" and he stood up, threw away his cigar, and pushed aside his papers, "this is good of you to come early, and bring your boy with

you, as I asked you to do. Well, Master Victor, how are you?—and how is Daisy?”

For there was a little girl at Arbutus Villa now, who had been christened Margaret, after the wife of her godfather, Mr. Byrne, but who was commonly known as Daisy. Victor the younger, a handsome seven years old boy, with the Malreward grey eyes and golden brown hair, but with his father's own grave and placid air, stood by his uncle's side, too manly any longer to sit on his knee, in silent happiness. He had much the same awestruck admiration for his Uncle Victor, that the latter at the same age had had for his Uncle Arthur.

“Stansfield will be here by-and-by, I suppose?” asked Victor; for it was on that evening that he and his wife were to dine at the Court in honour of Victor's taking possession. Presently they went indoors, and Victor took Freddy over the few rooms which he meant to occupy at present. The rest he said must wait unfurnished until the advent of “that not impossible She—” Mrs. Malreward.

“Oh! dear,” cried Freddy, “where is she? I should so like to see her!”

Victor laughed. “Unfortunately I know no more than you do. But I promise you shall see her as soon as I have met with her. I have gone back to my old quarters—the

cupola room," he said, as they went upstairs; "so much of my life seems mixed up with it, that I cannot fancy myself sleeping anywhere else in the Court. It is pleasant to look back upon one's miseries, even, when they are softened by distance. And here," he added, as they went down another corridor, "are Uncle Arthur's rooms, sacred to his use when he stays with me; never to be given to anyone else. He is out now, so I can show them you."

These were two rooms, newly and exquisitely furnished; a bedroom full of every kind of comfort—sofas, lounging chairs, the most delightful toilet appliances; a sitting-room opening out of it, equally luxurious—the furniture oak and green morocco, as much like the study at Tregalva Rectory as possible—a writing-table, with a delicious arm-chair drawn up before it, a well-stored book-case, choice engravings round the walls; it seemed as though Victor had forgotten nothing which could make these rooms attractive. "Dear Uncle Arthur," he said, as Freddy went into raptures over the beauty, comfort, and perfect taste shown everywhere; "you know that you and I always feel we cannot do half as much for him as we wish."

Arthur Byrne had just come to pay his nephew a long visit, having for three months exchanged duties with the Malreward Vicar, Mr.

Groves. By-and-by, the Rector having returned, and Victor the younger having departed homewards with Batson, in the pony-carriage, they had afternoon tea on the rustic table beneath the cedars. It struck Freddy, when she once more saw them together, that Victor was growing like their uncle. The younger man had something of the elder's look. He had grown broader-shouldered as he increased in years; he looked in perfect training; and there was not an ounce of flesh to spare about him in face or figure. He was no longer the delicate, slender, excitable boy we have known so long; he was a vigorous, fine-looking man, in the prime of life, with an air of splendid health and energy. And there was about him also a dignity, a seriousness almost amounting to severity. A man who keeps himself under strong control, can hardly fail, almost unconsciously, to control others. "I don't know how it is," Freddy had said to him one day, "but I am getting awfully afraid of you, dear old fellow!"

Victor smiled, and asked her why.

"You do not know it yourself, I daresay, but you look and speak so sternly sometimes that I begin to feel an awe of you, as I do of Uncle Arthur."

"Well," said Victor, thoughtfully, "I suppose life teaches one to be stern to oneself. But I

hope I am not stern to other people, least of all to you, dear."

"Not sterner than I deserve. Talk of women being naturally better than men, indeed! I shall never be one tenth part as good as my brother, either by nature or by grace!"

Freddy felt conscious that Victor was one in whom the order of life and growth was in accordance with the prayer of the Baptismal Service, "Grant that all carnal affections may die in him, and that all things belonging to the Spirit may live and grow in him."

Arthur Byrne himself had changed little since we saw him last. Certainly his hair was much greyer, perhaps he could not take those tremendous walks and rides which he used to take; once or twice in past winters he had suffered from attacks of bronchitis, and he had now to regard night air and draughts, and to take some care of himself generally. But his eye of fire, his firm step, his ringing voice, were little changed, although in two years more he would have attained three score and ten.

Freddy was still youthful-looking, and bright-complexioned; nothing preserves youthful charms like healthy, active employment of mind and body, a life full of wide and serious interests, such as hers had now become. She was very lovely, with a soft, matronly dignity, with a

mingling of the most perfect simplicity, and unconscious consciousness (if I may use the term) of power.

Stansfield Erle, who presently joined the party, was getting quite a middle-aged man, a genial, comfortable-looking Paterfamilias, with far more of the air of a country Squire than Victor had. For Stansfield, lawyer as he was, had decided sporting tendencies, and he often shot over his brother-in-law's land, whilst Victor, the Lord of the Manor, though his life was anything but a sedentary one, had the tastes of a literary man.

The Rector and the lawyer had been on most friendly terms since that day six years ago, when Stansfield, pale and hollow-eyed from his long illness, held out his wasted hand to Arthur Byrne, and said, with a frank and manly, yet somewhat humbled air, "Will you shake hands with me now, Mr. Byrne? You told me when I saw you last that the day might come when I too might be sick and suffering, but that you hoped I might then find from others the kindness which I denied Victor. I have been sick and suffering, and I have found kindness—kindness the most perfect, and it was from Victor himself."

The last time that Victor, Freddy and Stansfield had been together at the Court was during those few dreadful minutes, on the night when

Victor, having found temporary relief from his troubles in sleep, Stansfield had invaded the drawing-room, and had roughly awakened Victor; bitter words had passed between the two men, one wild, unavailing prayer from Freddy—then—— It made her cheeks burn even now to remember how Stansfield had torn her away from her brother, had carried her out of the house by brute force. “But why should I think of it? God be praised, how happy we are here together to-day! Stansfield and Victor are like brothers—if they do not altogether sympathise, they have the most thorough esteem for each other, and I can come here and see my dear Victor, and consult with him, and help him about little things, whenever I like; and with my husband to love me, and my children to look after, and a little writing to do now and then, I am happier than, when I first married, I could ever, in my wildest moments, have hoped that I should become.”

After dinner the Rector rose and said, “I think we ought to drink the health of the Lord of the Manor, on this happy occasion of his taking possession of the Court, with his estate restored, through his own exertions, to the most perfect order and cultivation.”

“Pray spare me a speech, your Reverence, or I shall have to make you one in reply,” laughed Victor.

"I bow to the request of my host, and will therefore merely wish him, in hackneyed, but heartfelt words, health, long life, and prosperity at Malreward Court!"

"Hear! hear!" cried Stansfield; "and a perfect little treasure of a wife, as I have!"

The toast was drunk; and then Victor rose, his face beaming with an almost solemn light, a deep emotion making him unable to say more than these few words—"Dear uncle, brother, and sister, I welcome you here, and I thank you, with all my heart."

CHAPTER XIII.

The world and Satan are o'ercome,
Before thee gleams eternal light,
Warrior, who hast won the strife.

Sintram.

THE dinner had been given to the tenants; a grand entertainment in a marquee in the park had been provided for the labourers and their families, which marquee had been nearly brought down about their heads by vociferous cheering for the young Squire; and now, as Freddy had predicted, some of the county dignitaries had left their cards at Malreward Court. "Nothing succeeds like success," said Victor, "and I must confess that a man can hardly drive through my property without seeing that I have succeeded. But I fear I hardly feel as complimented as I ought to feel. It is a little too late, you see."

Neighbouring Squires, with families of grown-up daughters, had become aware that young Malreward, with his flourishing estate, and income of over £3,000 a year, was an eligible

parti, to whom much might be forgiven, and who, if he had helped to put his disreputable old father out of the way eight years ago, might, now that he had settled down like a respectable country gentleman, be excused that pardonable weakness of his younger days, just as a mere matter of sowing of wild oats. But far more gratifying to Victor than these tardy overtures of friendship was the almost adoration with which the poor population of his estate regarded their lord, who had given them good cottages and potato-grounds, and who, if he had introduced machines, and had turned the Malreward Arms into a reading-room and coffee-shop, had atoned for his obstinate continuance in these errors in a hundred comfortable ways. Still his popularity with them made him sometimes sigh—"‘Alas! the gratitude of men has often left me mourning.’ For," thought he, "what have I done for my people more than was my duty to do, more than any landlord ought to do—but does not?" As for his tenants, he had bound them to himself by the strongest ties of regard. He had granted them long leases of their farms, he had reduced pheasants to a low ebb, and, as far as possible, had abolished rabbits throughout the estate.

One Sunday afternoon, during the month of June, Victor and his uncle were sitting beneath

the cedars. There were glimpses of the deepest azure between the flat grey roofing of boughs, long green shadows, long golden lights lay across the lawn, crimson and cream-coloured roses were climbing over a trellis-work, and scattering their petals over the grass, the warm sunny air was full of an indefinable, ecstatic sweetness. Was it the scent of honeysuckle and mignonette, all the myriads of flowers in the garden?—was it the song of thrushes and blackcaps, of a hundred different yet harmonious voices? The western distance was all amber haze and purple shadow, while opposite the sun the trees were steeped in golden greenness, and stood out vivid, distinct, yet ineffably soft. It was one of those days which seem the glory of the whole year, when all nature is at its height and culmination of splendour. The brilliant verdure of spring had not departed, yet vegetation was in full maturity; the sun had reached its meridian, and yet the birds still sang and the flowers still bloomed, and the world was not silenced, nor a leaf yet faded.

The Rector and his nephew had not spoken to each other for an hour past. Arthur Byrne was thinking over the sermon he was going to preach that evening at Malreward church, and Victor, who was lying full-length upon a garden-seat, had been half dreaming, in a luxurious

state of enjoyment of the exquisite summer afternoon, and his own pleasant thoughts. Presently he took up a Bible which was lying on the table, and began turning over its pages. When the Rector had gathered together his papers, and looked as though he might be spoken to, Victor said, "What a strange, dreamy, melancholy beauty there is about this passage in Isaiah which I have just lighted upon! I can scarcely tell its exact meaning, but it seems to me like a lovely pathetic bit of poetry about death, like dying upon a summer day like this." And he read aloud a few verses.

"Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty, they shall behold the land which is very far off.

"Look upon Sion the city of our solemnities. Thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation.

"For there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams, wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.

"And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick, the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity."

The Rector was a little startled, he knew not why. He looked at Victor, as he lay beneath the cedar tree, golden lights from the afternoon sun flecking his bright hair, his agile young limbs, his face, still youthful though very firm and manly, clear and radiant with health. "Why should those words make you think of death?" asked his uncle.

"I do not know," answered Victor. "Only there is some passage in one of De Quincey's essays, is there not? about the long days of splendid summer weather always suggesting to him the thought of death—by very force of contrast, I suppose. And when one is very happy, as I am now, with the toughest part of my work done, and the friends all around me whom I have, I think that thought naturally comes to one."

And then Victor smiled at himself, as if he had been relapsing into something of his boyish sentimentality, and springing up from his lounging position with an alert and active look, he began to talk to the Rector about some prosaic matter of business.

The following morning, when Victor went into his stables, he found his groom, a very intelligent young man, in whom he took a good deal of interest, in great trouble. In answer to his master's enquiries, he told him that his father, a mason living in the town of Donnistone, was very ill, and that though they had sent to him again and again, they could not get the parish doctor, a Mr. Clark, of whom Victor had before heard complaints, to give him any attention. "Well, I am going to Donnistone this morning," said the young Squire; "I will go and see your father and call on Mr. Clark."

Which Victor accordingly did. He found James

Mundy, his groom's father, a very respectable middle-aged working man, lying quite unconscious, in what was evidently a raging fever, and his wife half distracted at being unable to get proper medical attendance for him. "I will call on Mr. Clark myself," said Victor, after saying a few kind words to Mrs. Mundy, and giving her a little money, for they were evidently very poor, and she told him that her husband had been out of work all the previous winter, and that she herself had been ill in the spring.

"Indeed, sir, we have had a sight of trouble," she said, as she poured forth a torrent of gratitude.

"Well," said the young Squire, as he went away, "your son shall ride over this afternoon to see you, and if necessary he shall fetch Dr. Radcliffe."

However, Victor's peremptory expostulation with Mr. Clark had the desired effect, and the latter condescended to pay more attention to James Mundy than he had hitherto done. Victor went to see the sick man once or twice more, scorning, in the pride of his health and strength, all fear of infection, although he found that Mundy's complaint was nothing less than typhus fever, and that it was raging in the part of the town in which he lived.

A stranger might have imagined the text to be hardly in keeping with a life which had ended at the early age of 29. But these other words often came into Arthur Byrne's mind, when he thought of Victor: "He being made perfect in a short time, fulfilled a long time."

The Rector was now quite an old man. His hair and whiskers were snow-white, his shoulders were bent, and he leaned heavily upon his stick as he walked. The preceding winter he had had such a severe attack of bronchitis, that his medical man had advised him to leave for a time the bleak north of Cornwall. He resolved, therefore, to give up his living altogether—to give it up, as he said, to some younger and more useful man. He left Tregalva for ever, to the bitter grief of most of his parishioners, but he seemed scarcely able to regret the parting. It was to him merely the breaking of one more tie, and the last but one, which bound him to earth. And now he had accepted the earnest invitation of Stansfield Erle and his wife to take up his abode with them at Malreward Court, in the rooms which Victor had furnished for him a few weeks before his death.

"I thought I should find you here, uncle," said Freddy. "I have brought some fresh flowers, you see." And she knelt down and placed on Victor's tomb the white roses and

trunk of a felled tree, his elbows resting on his knees, and his head upon his hands, whilst Boadicea grazed quietly by his side. "My dear fellow, what has happened?" cried the Rector in dismay, thinking that he had been thrown from his horse.

Then Victor lifted up a deadly white face, and said with a forced smile, "I don't know. I was a little faint, I think. I dismounted somehow——" and then he rose, with an evident effort.

"Take my arm," said Arthur Byrne; "I will lead Boadicea." As Victor laid his hand upon his uncle's arm, the Rector felt it burning hot, even through his coat-sleeve. An awful terror seemed to pierce right through Arthur Byrne's very heart. He had felt nothing like *that* terror ever since his wife's death.

Victor confessed, as they returned slowly to the Court, that he had felt very queer all the day before, and said that he would lie down a little, and try and sleep off his headache. Accordingly he lay on the sofa in his bedroom for the rest of the day, but he could not sleep, except by uneasy snatches; and as for food—he abhorred the very thought of it. The Rector stole in and out of the room once or twice, but only to find his nephew restless, shivering, burning hot, and complaining of his head. Ar-

thur Byrne would speak cheerfully to him, and advise some simple remedy ; then he would go back to his own room, and try to read or write ; but would find himself unable to do anything but pace up and down, and wander restlessly through the house, thinking of Victor. Without telling his nephew, the Rector had sent for Dr. Radcliffe ; but the messenger returned to say that he had been summoned to an urgent case many miles away, and he could not possibly come to Malteward Court at all that day. Towards evening, Victor complained that his headache was growing worse, and at an early hour he went to bed.

Next morning the Rector found him still flushed, shivering, tossing to and fro, his breathing short ; and when Mr. Byrne took up his hand to feel his pulse, it seemed to scorch him. But Victor made light of it all. "I did not sleep much last night, certainly ; but there is nothing serious the matter with me. I think a little touch of sunstroke, very likely—the weather has been so hot lately. I shall be all right again to-morrow, I daresay. Please go and have your breakfast, uncle, and send me up a cup of strong tea." And then he smiled. There was an almost unearthly beauty about him, with his crimson cheeks, and wonderfully brilliant eyes, and his golden-brown hair tum-

bled about his forehead. He smiled ; but his uncle did not smile.

After breakfast, when the Rector returned to him, he found, to his astonishment, that Victor was up and nearly dressed. "My dear fellow, what in the world are you about ? Do go back to bed !"

"No," said Victor, speaking rather quickly. "I am going to Donnistone. Mrs. Jennings has just told me that poor James Mundy is dying, and that the man who lived next door, and who, as I knew, had been ill with the same fever, died yesterday ; and Clark had not been to see him at all ; and there is to be an inquest this morning, and I must go and give the evidence which has come to my knowledge lately, about the way in which that drunken brute neglects the poor !"

Arthur Byrne found it useless to say anything more. Victor was not now a young fellow with whom he could interfere—he was a strong-willed man, who had determined that, come what would, he would go to the inquest, and expose Mr. Clark's delinquencies. "Perhaps the Board of Guardians will listen to me, when they would stop their ears at the complaints of all the sick and neglected poor. At all events, I will try."

And the Rector could only stand by and

watch the resolute manner in which Victor tried to overcome his manifest illness. It cost him sickening toil to dress, and yet he forced himself to do it. "How are you going?" asked his uncle. "You will not attempt to ride, surely?"

"No; I have sent Mundy to borrow a horse and trap from one of my tenants. Now, I am ready at last. I must be a weak fool, indeed, if I would let a headache conquer me!"

Slowly, painfully, he crept downstairs; the farmer's horse and trap were waiting at the door. "You must let me have my way now, Victor," said Mr. Byrne. "I am going with you to Donnistone."

"By all means, uncle. I shall be delighted with your company." But he refused the Rector's offer of driving. "No, thanks; I want to try this horse. I like the look of him."

Before long the trap had a narrow escape from being overturned into the ditch, by Victor's pulling the wrong rein. "It will not do, I see," he said, faintly smiling. "Would you mind changing places with me, after all? I cannot see clearly," he muttered; "things look all red, as though there was blood everywhere."

The Rector took the reins, and Victor leaned back, rested his head on his hand, and shut his eyes. Not another word was spoken until they

reached Donnistone, but from time to time Arthur Byrne glanced anxiously round at his nephew. They drove up to a small inn, and then Victor aroused himself, declined the help of his uncle's arm, and, as steadily as if there were nothing the matter with him, he walked into the room where the inquest was being held.

Mr. Netherby, the coroner, fixed his cold, shrewd, cynical eyes upon the young Squire, as he advanced towards him, and requested to be sworn. Perhaps he remembered another inquest, nearly eight years ago, when Victor Malreward had given evidence before him—evidence which had blasted so many of the young man's bright hopes, and had for years stained his name in the eyes of the world. As if by one tremendous effort, Victor had collected all his fast-failing faculties, and forced them to obey his will—he gave his testimony clearly, concisely, and unflinchingly exposed the neglect and maltreatment of the poor, of which the parish doctor, Mr. Clark, who sat there frowning, reddening, glaring at him, had for a long time past been guilty.

"I think I have no more to say." Victor put up his hand to his forehead with a bewildered look; then, as if nature gave way the instant the strain he had put upon himself was relaxed,

with a sudden crash he fell right down upon the floor.

Mr. Netherby said shortly afterwards with a sneer that young Malreward seemed in the habit of fainting away. He made that remark once—he did not make it again.

The Rector, who had been watching his nephew intently, and standing as near to him as possible the whole time, sprang forward, and kneeling down, he raised his head, unfastened his necktie. “Stand back!—give him air, will you?” he cried imperiously, as people came crowding round, in terror and pity at the sight of the grey-haired old man, supporting in his arms the young man, who seemed to be dying.

The usual restoratives were applied, Victor revived, and in time was able, leaning on his uncle, to leave the room, and get into the trap, and be driven home by the Rector, who, with the reins in one hand, kept his other arm round Victor’s shoulders and held him up.

“Now I have done it, as I said I would, and so I will go to bed again,” said Victor, as they alighted at the Court, and his uncle helped him upstairs. Soon afterwards, Dr. Radcliffe paid his expected visit. After staying some time with Victor, and closely observing his symptoms, he bade him good-bye for the present, saying that he would call again in the evening;

and then the doctor and the Rector went out of the room together.

"Well, Radcliffe," said Mr. Byrne, looking into his old friend's face with an agony of beseeching.

The doctor grasped his hand and wrung it. "I dare not deceive you, Byrne—yes, he has undoubtedly taken this fever which is raging in the slums of Donnistone, and his obstinate persistence in getting up and going to that inquest will make it go all the harder with him. It was one of the most rash, outrageous, heroic things I ever heard of a man's doing. But, please God, we shall pull him through, nevertheless. I am going to Donnistone presently, and will drive round to Arbutus Villa, and break the sorrowful tidings to Mrs. Erle, poor little soul!"

Arthur Byrne made no reply. ⁶ It seemed almost as though he had had a stroke of paralysis. He could not feel; he could not think; he could not look forward—all that he could do was to sit by his nephew's bedside, to watch his every look, his every movement, to anticipate his slightest wish. Victor was now sinking into a state of stupor, the reaction from the extreme efforts he had made that morning; and as the day wore on, his mind began to wander, although he still knew his uncle, and could answer rationally when addressed.

The sun was declining towards the west, the world was full of golden light, of the song of birds and scent of flowers, when the door opened noiselessly, and Freddy stole across the room. She was very pale, but there was a firm, calm look about her, as if she were nerved to do and suffer anything. She went up to Victor's bedside, and bent over him. "My darling," she said softly.

And then he opened his eyes, and looked up at her with his own sweet, pathetic smile. "Dear old Freddy!—but you ought not to be here. I have the fever, you know."

"Yes, dear, I am come to help Uncle Arthur nurse you. Stansfield said I might come; you went to him when he was ill, you remember."

And then Victor, satisfied, or too ill to make further opposition, closed his eyes again, merely saying, "It is my own fault—my stupid carelessness. I went to see Mundy once after a hard day's work—when I was tired and wanted my dinner—I must have taken the infection then."

"It was a hard struggle to Stansfield, I know," Freddy told the Rector, when out of Victor's hearing; "the risk for me seemed so terrible to him—he wanted to go to Victor himself—but I reminded him that he was as much to the children as I was, and nobody could be

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was a time when a crisis seemed taking place in Victor's illness—the Rector had an interview alone with his old friend.

"My dear Byrne," he said, taking his hand, and looking at him with tears in his eyes, "you wish me to tell you the whole truth, I know. He may get over it yet—but—there are some unfavourable symptoms, and his extreme prostration must make us very anxious. If we can only keep up his strength!—He has the two best of nurses in you and Mrs. Erle—he has youth on his side—only do not be *too* sanguine. My dear old friend," he added, very solemnly and tenderly, for a wild and awful look passed over the Rector's face—"it is not for me to remind you, that whatever happens, we must all say—God's will be done!"

Arthur Byrne wrenched away his hand from the doctor's, and cried in a strange, hoarse voice—"I should be a hypocrite if I said God's will be done! I cannot say it, I never have said it, since he was first taken ill! Radcliffe, he is just my only son to me! Now, leave me," he added, with a sudden dignity, "I must fight this out alone; it is between my God and me!"

When the door of his room was shut upon him, Arthur Byrne fell upon his knees, and clasping his hands together on the table before him, hid his face. For a long time only

maiden-hair fern. "How fond he always was of flowers! Now, dear Uncle Arthur, do come with me; you must not stay here too long," and she tenderly laid her hand on his arm, and drew him away from the grave.

"Yes," said Arthur Byrne, with a quiet sigh, "He is not here, he is risen." And then involuntarily he looked up to the clear blue heavens, where all whom he loved best seemed to be, and an unearthly light beamed upon his aged face.

"Shall we walk a little way through the park?" said Freddy. "I am going to meet Stansfield."

"What beautiful order everything is in!" remarked the Rector, as they sauntered beneath the trees, now in all their summer glory of foliage.

"Yes, Stansfield and I try to keep everything as he would have liked it to be. Poor, dear Stansfield; I am afraid he was a little unpopular at first, as who would not have been after *him*? But I think all the people must see now what is our earnest desire. I am sure Stansfield is always saying to me—'How do you think Victor would have had it done? Would this have pleased him, do you think?'"

And so, through Stansfield's treating Freddy not indeed as if he thought her the real owner

some way. What is money to me now?"

"The estate goes to Freddy, as you know," Victor went on presently. "I wish the law gave her a little more control over it than she will have. But in the manner in which the property is settled, I am powerless to improve her position. However, I can trust Stansfield; he is a most upright man; he will make an excellent Lord of the Manor."

Here Freddy, who had been sleeping for a few hours, came into the room. She was very calm, as she had been throughout Victor's illness, so that she sometimes marvelled at herself. She felt vaguely that she should break down by-and-by—die perhaps; but at present what she had to do was to think only of Victor and of their uncle. She dared not lose self-control for a single moment, for both the two men depended upon her care. The Rector was more to be pitied even than herself; in losing Victor he lost his earthly all.

"Dear uncle," whispered Freddy, "do go away and rest a little. I will call you instantly if Victor wants you."

"I cannot go—I cannot leave him!" the Rector answered.

And then Victor exerted all his fast-failing strength to give his sister a few last commissions. "You will be such a darling, dignified

little Lady of the Manor," he went on, smiling; "and I know Stansfield will let you do all these small things for me. And he will make such an admirable country squire—he was born for it."

"Oh! don't—don't! Oh-how can I bear it?" Freddy almost shrieked, for one moment realizing the future—the future without Victor. Then she fell on her knees, and hid her face in the bed-clothes, and clenched her finger-nails into her palms. Whatever might be her suffering, she would not disturb him by any token of it.

"You have your husband and your children, darling," and Victor laid his wasted hand upon her head. "I cannot speak any more now." He was much exhausted—the remainder of that night he passed in a state of stupor, from which they now and then aroused him, to take some nourishment or cordial.

But all these things were losing effect upon him now. The next morning he was scarcely able to speak, except a word or two at long intervals. And he had two fainting fits, during which each feeble breath seemed as though it would be his last. About noon he revived a little, and was able to listen to the Rector, as he read a prayer, or a few verses from the Bible. And, as had been arranged, when Dr. Radcliffe came that afternoon, Victor received the Holy Communion from his uncle, in company with

Freddy and the doctor, the kind old friend of his boyhood.

The sun shone in all his summer splendour : the birds sang rapturously ; the scent of hay, the sound of distant voices, were wafted in through the wide open windows, bees hummed in the flowers, and the liquid blue sky, and high up white summer clouds, were over all. Everywhere out of doors there was fulness of life and joy, but in Victor's room there was death—and yet death more sweet, and beautiful, and divine than life. It was a solemn, peaceful moment, when they knelt round his bedside ; it seemed as though God had already wiped away all tears from their eyes, and there could be no more sorrow or sighing or pain. How could they any more regret their dear one's dying ? Heaven itself seemed in the room ; there was a reflection of its glory on his face, all grief was hushed, all longing—save that they might go with him when he went ; when he “ passed from death unto life,”—those words seemed to linger in the room, in all their hearts, long afterwards.

When it was all over, and Dr. Radcliffe was about to go—“ Good-bye, dear doctor,” said Victor, “ you have been a kind friend to me ever since I was a boy. And so has your cousin, Tom Wardour. Give him my love, and tell him

I thank him with all my heart. How happy we were together in the old Oxford days !”

And now throughout that evening and the following night, his uncle and his sister never left him. They knew the end was not far off. The doctor had said he might linger through the following day, but he could give them no further hope. He said that he had known from the first that his patient had placed himself at a great disadvantage in contending with his illness, by his imprudence in going to the inquest. “ But—” he added—“ it is only a fit ending to so pure and noble a life.”

Victor could now scarcely swallow the cordials with which they sought to sustain him. But he was in no pain ; he lay quite still, his eyes looking upward, full of the “ peace which passeth all understanding.”

“ Dear Freddy,” he said to her, during that night, rousing himself, after a long silence and state of semi-consciousness, “ no wife even could have been more sympathizing, more one in mind and soul with me, than you have been. How you have helped me, and entered into all my plans !”

“ Victor, my only brother,” she answered, her lips pressed against his hand, “ if you could but know how I have loved you, all my life long !”

"I think I do know," he said, with his exquisite, unearthly smile. "Or I shall know by-and-by, when I meet you again—in Heaven. Give my love to Stansfield. I should like to have seen him once more. But for your children's sake, that must not be. I cannot have you both run the risk you have done for me—my dearest, my sister."

Then, with his hand still clasped in Freddy's, he turned to the Rector. "And you—Uncle Arthur—how can I give you any idea of what you, too, have been to me? It is you—being what you are—who have taught me to believe that I have a Heavenly Father—your love and care over me must have been a type of His, learnt from Him. Ah—what would have become of me, if God and you had not had patience with me?—and now it cannot be many years before you will be with me again—your poor, foolish, wayward son, who loves you so."

He was silent for a long time after that, the effort of speaking exhausted him greatly. His mind wandered a little as the night went on, and he fancied himself at Tregalva; his confused memory went back to the time when he, a boy, forced to live at Malreward Court, had at last been allowed to return home—to the night when, once more happy, with his uncle and his

sister, they had driven across the moors. "I think I hear waves murmuring," he whispered. "I am very near home, now. I hear the sea. Is it Eternity, I wonder? 'For there, the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams.'"

Towards morning, it became evident that he was sinking fast. "Do you know me, darling?" Freddy asked him once, as she knelt by his side; and he turned to her sweet, loving eyes, and smiled, but could not speak.

Grey dawn, dewy fragrant air, stole into the room; a thrush began to sing plaintively in a tree close to the open window. The sky grew rosy with the coming sun; and Arthur Byrne, who was kneeling on the other side of the bed, supporting Victor's head upon his breast—for it had become difficult to him to breathe, and a little while ago he had asked to be lifted up—Arthur Byrne, seeing the light in the sky, a light which seemed reflected on Victor's face, repeated, half unconsciously, the words—"The Sun of Righteousness shall rise."

Soon after that, he perceived that Victor's breathing was becoming fainter and fainter. "Kiss me, once more, both of you," he whispered. So first Freddy bent over him and kissed him, then Arthur Byrne did the same. A slight convulsion seemed to pass over him, and

he struggled for a few moments, but he soon grew quiet again.

"It is all peace with you now, is it not?" asked the Rector.

"Perfect peace," he whispered, with an ineffable smile. And then, even as he spoke the words, they saw that he softly passed away.

CHAPTER XIV.

Fear no more the heat of the sun
 Nor the furious winter rages,
 Thou thy worldly task hast done,
 Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.

Cymbeline.

ONE summer evening, a year afterwards, Mrs. Stansfield Erle crossed the lawn at Malreward Court, opened the iron gate which led into the park, and turned towards the churchyard. She was still very lovely and youthful-looking, black crape hung about her golden-brown hair, and in her hands she held some white roses and maiden-hair fern. As she went up the gravel walk of the churchyard, which was now kept like a garden, she soon found him whom she had come to seek. Arthur Byrne was standing, with both hands resting on his walking stick, looking down upon a white marble cross which bore these words :

VICTOR MALREWARD.

DIED JUNE 29th, 18—.

Aged 29 years.

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course."

A stranger might have imagined the text to be hardly in keeping with a life which had ended at the early age of 29. But these other words often came into Arthur Byrne's mind, when he thought of Victor: "He being made perfect in a short time, fulfilled a long time."

The Rector was now quite an old man. His hair and whiskers were snow-white, his shoulders were bent, and he leaned heavily upon his stick as he walked. The preceding winter he had had such a severe attack of bronchitis, that his medical man had advised him to leave for a time the bleak north of Cornwall. He resolved, therefore, to give up his living altogether—to give it up, as he said, to some younger and more useful man. He left Tregalva for ever, to the bitter grief of most of his parishioners, but he seemed scarcely able to regret the parting. It was to him merely the breaking of one more tie, and the last but one, which bound him to earth. And now he had accepted the earnest invitation of Stansfield Erle and his wife to take up his abode with them at Malreward Court, in the rooms which Victor had furnished for him a few weeks before his death.

"I thought I should find you here, uncle," said Freddy. "I have brought some fresh flowers, you see." And she knelt down and placed on Victor's tomb the white roses and

maiden-hair fern. "How fond he always was of flowers! Now, dear Uncle Arthur, do come with me; you must not stay here too long," and she tenderly laid her hand on his arm, and drew him away from the grave.

"Yes," said Arthur Byrne, with a quiet sigh, "He is not here, he is risen." And then involuntarily he looked up to the clear blue heavens, where all whom he loved best seemed to be, and an unearthly light beamed upon his aged face.

"Shall we walk a little way through the park?" said Freddy. "I am going to meet Stansfield."

"What beautiful order everything is in!" remarked the Rector, as they sauntered beneath the trees, now in all their summer glory of foliage.

"Yes, Stansfield and I try to keep everything as he would have liked it to be. Poor, dear Stansfield; I am afraid he was a little unpopular at first, as who would not have been after *him*? But I think all the people must see now what is our earnest desire. I am sure Stansfield is always saying to me—'How do you think Victor would have had it done? Would this have pleased him, do you think?'"

And so, through Stansfield's treating Freddy not indeed as if he thought her the real owner

of the place, but still as if she were Victor's representative, and the exponent of his views, Freddy gained almost as much control over her own estate as Victor could have hoped she would have.

"How strange it seems," Freddy went on, sadly, "that he should have had all the labour, all the care and anxiety of restoring the estate, and atoning for past neglect; and then, after he had been working and denying himself, and living with the most rigid economy for years, as soon as it was all done, and he would have been able to marry, and get into Parliament, and thoroughly enjoy life, then—then we have to come here, and take from him everything that he had gained."

"Yes; 'one soweth and another reapeth, other men have laboured, ye have entered into their labours'—seems the law of this world," answered the Rector.

It seemed, too, as though Victor were a link between the past and the future; between the wicked house of the Malrewards, and the stainless lineage of the Erles. He—heavily weighted in the race of life with the credit of his ancestors' sins, and with his own passionate temperament, had fought and suffered, and had finally conquered—"so as by fire." But not for him was any earthly crown of victory; as soon as

his work was done he had to leave it—to leave the fruits of his labours to Stansfield Erle, a man who, in the eyes of the world, was far worthier than himself. And soon his very name would be forgotten, save by his own family, and by the poor of the neighbourhood. The old legend of the Malrewards was fulfilled—"The last of his name shall save himself and his house, and the end shall be peace and righteousness."

"There are the children," exclaimed Freddy; and presently little Victor and Daisy left their nurse, and came bounding across the grass. The girl was like her father, placid, flaxen-haired, but Victor looked like a true Malreward. They soon ran off again, chasing each other, and the Rector remarked—"Your children seem very strong and healthy."

"Yes, I do my best to make them so. At present, they run wild the greater part of the day, but when they are at their lessons I keep them strictly to work. I teach them myself, you know."

"You make a much better mother than I should have expected, Mrs. Freddy," said the Rector, with something of his old arch smile.

"I do not know about that," she answered, smiling also. "Stansfield was rather scandalized at first, because I was not always playing with

them, and talking nonsense to them, in the way he thought mothers always did. I think I feel the care of children to be less of a pleasure, more of a responsibility, than many women do. I have no sympathy with baby-worship, it seems to me nothing more than an animal instinct, the love of a cat for a kitten. But every year as the minds of my children open, and their characters develope, they become more and more delightful to me. Men have enough to answer for—one must give them the credit of being less selfish about their children than women generally are. Mothers pamper them, and talk nonsense to them, and dress them up, and, in short, make dolls of them; and fathers look far ahead, and plan for them, and are hard upon them for their good. And, dear Uncle Arthur, if indeed my children turn out well, it will be because you have taught me so much; and these three things I try to keep always in my mind—to have very few rules, and to enforce those rules with a quite awe-inspiring strictness, to do my utmost to make them feel my thorough sympathy with them in all their little joys and troubles, and to develope in them, and to reverence, their sense of self-respect.”

“Your little Victor is very like what *he* was at the same age,” said the Rector presently.

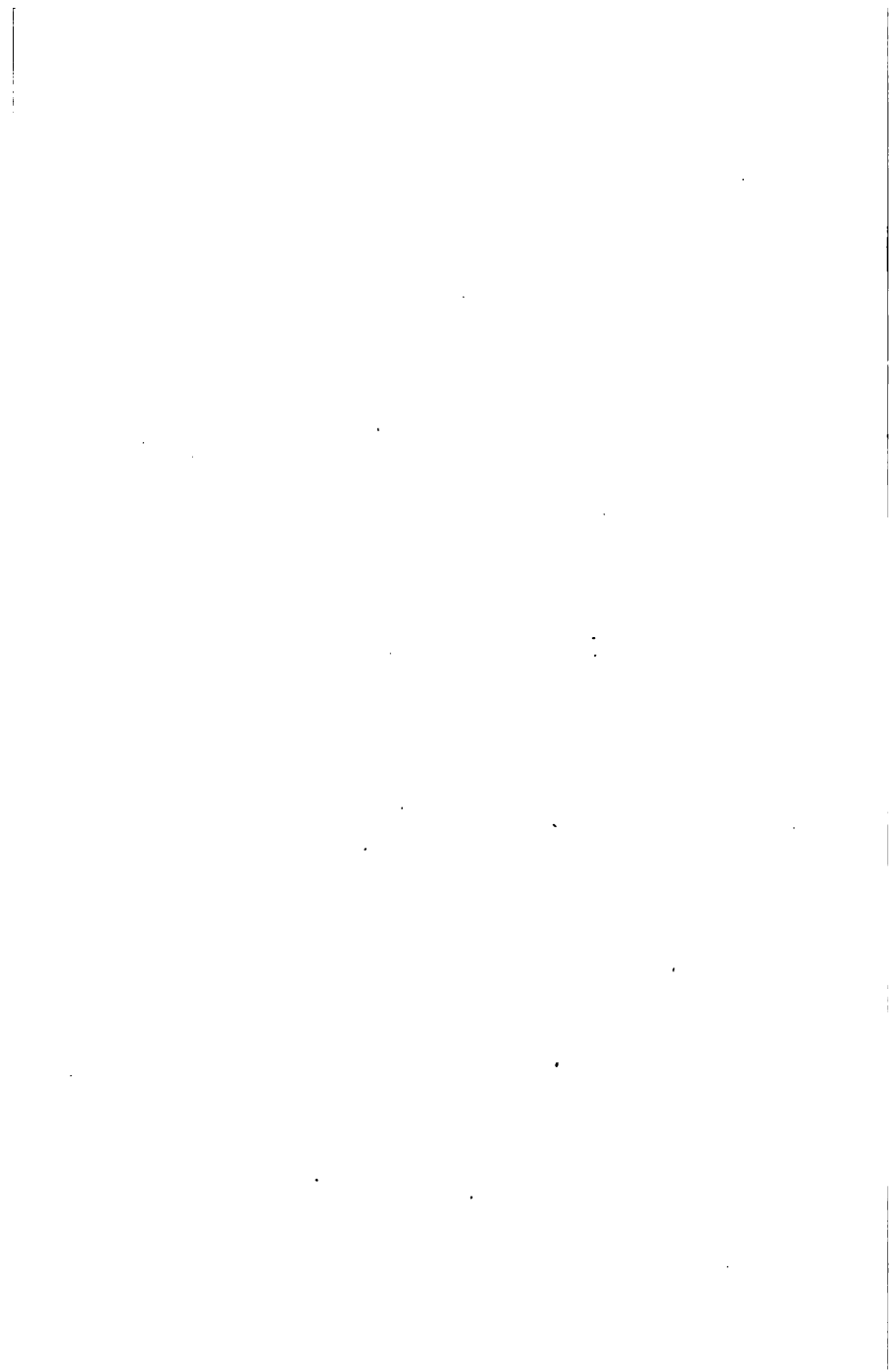
“Do you think so?” answered Freddy eager-

ly. "How glad I am!—how I will try to make my son grow up like him! Yes, I think my little Victor already shows something of his unselfishness, his conscientiousness; and he has some of his sweet little winning ways, while he has Stansfield's own placid temper. There he is!" and Freddy instinctively quickened her pace as a gentleman on horseback came in sight—fair-haired, stately, a "great, broad-shouldered, genial Englishman;" the model of a country squire and magistrate. "My dear Stansfield, here you are, then!" said his wife, with a brightening look.

"Yes, here I am, my love, and glad enough to be at home again!"

"After all," thought Arthur Byrne, "my boy is more to me than he is to any one else in the world. And now it cannot be very long before I shall be with him."

THE END.



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